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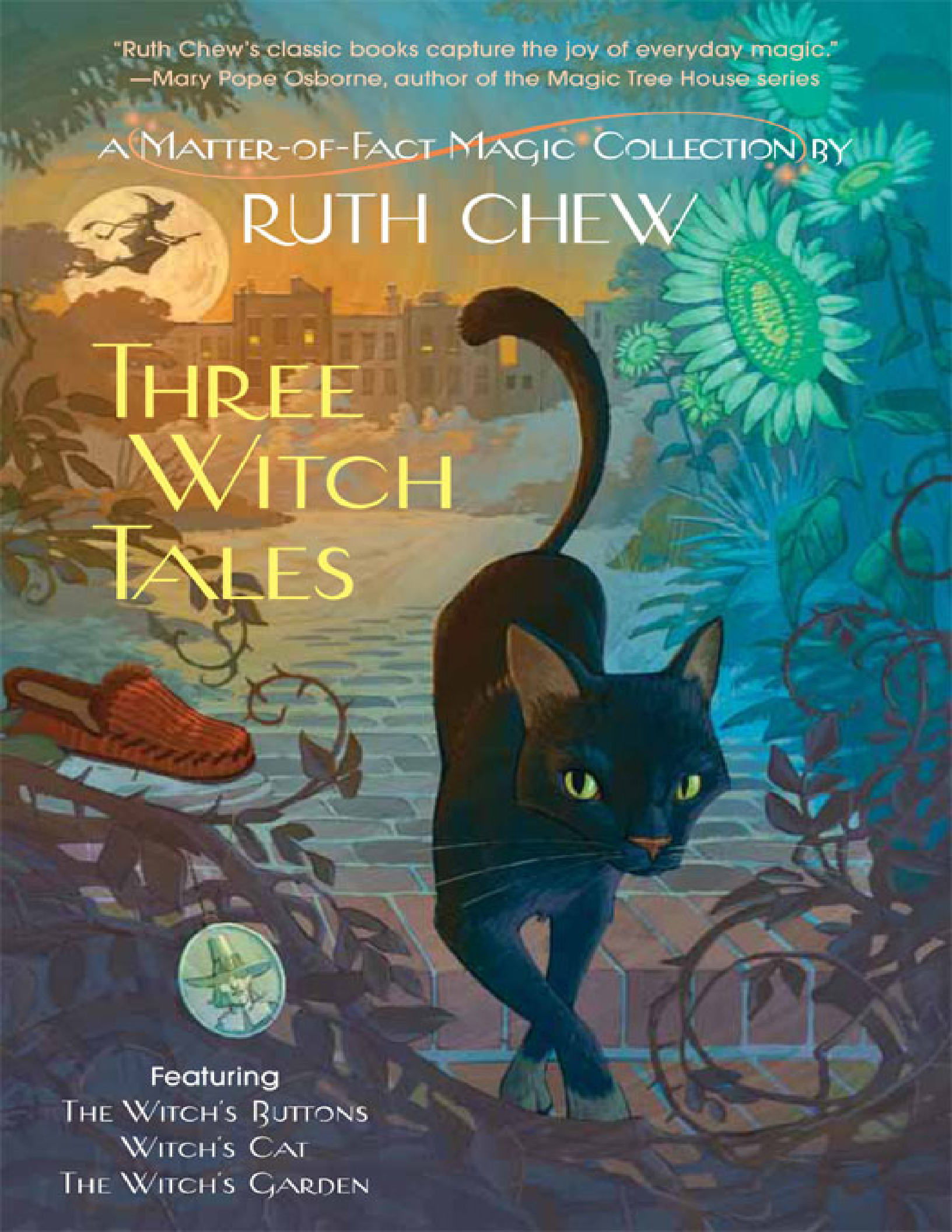

Three Witch Tales

Featuring
The Witch's Buttons
Witch's Cat
The Witch's Garden

Also by Ruth Chew

NO SUCH THING AS A WITCH

WHAT THE WITCH LEFT

MAGIC IN THE PARK

THE TROUBLE WITH MAGIC

THREE WISHING TALES

(AN EBOOK OMNIBUS):

THE MAGIC COIN

THE MAGIC CAVE

THE WISHING TREE

RUTH CHEW

THREE WITCH TALES

with illustrations by the author

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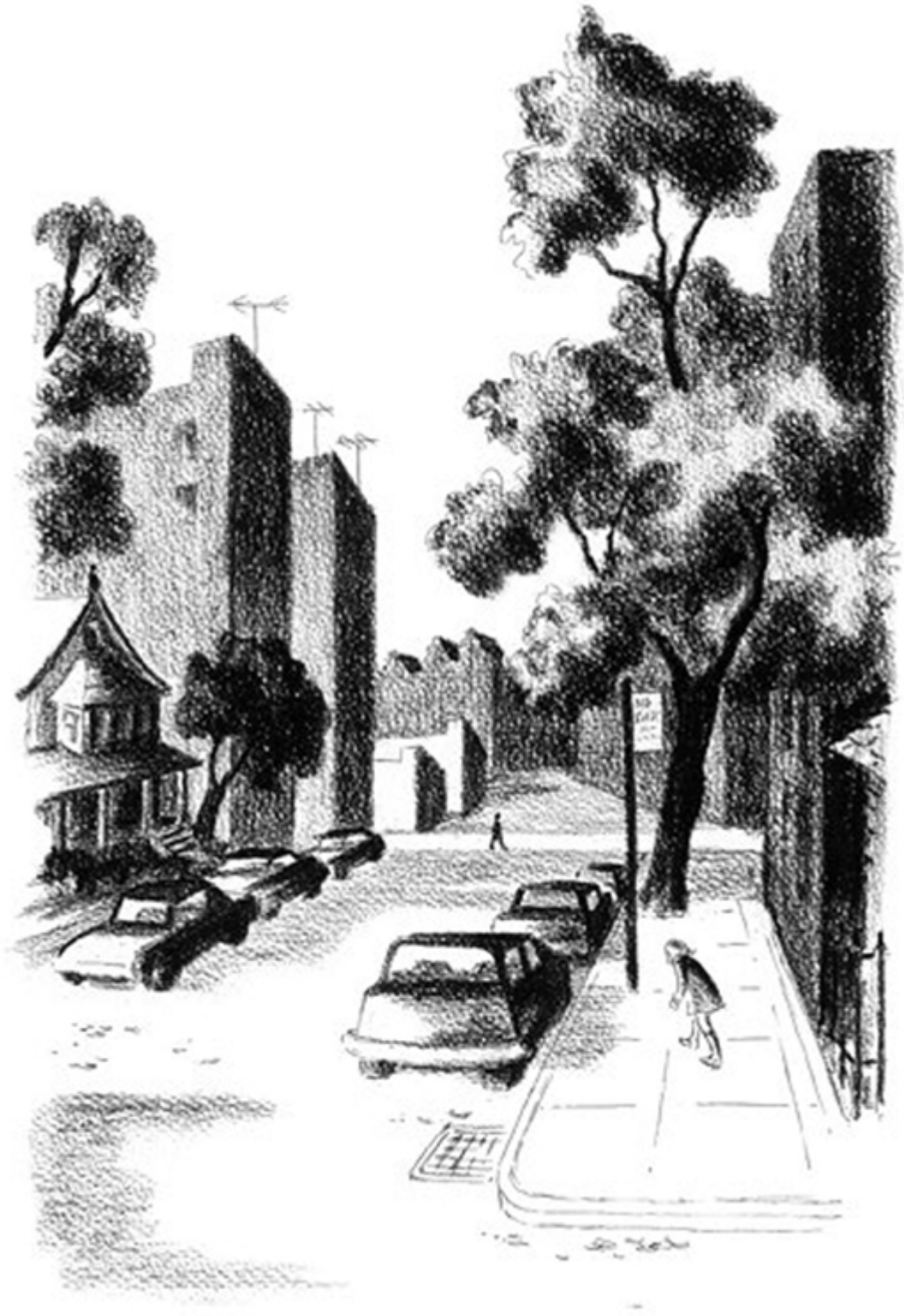
RUTH CHEW

THE WITCH'S BUTTONS

with illustrations by the author



“Oh, Sandy, don’t tell me you’ve already lost a button!” Mrs. James was changing the diaper on Sandy’s baby sister. She was tired and cross.

Sandy had just come home from school. She looked down at the brass buttons on her new navy blue coat. There were only five instead of six. “They were all here when I left school. I must have lost it on the way home,” she said. “I’ll go back and look for it.”

Sandy walked the four blocks to school. She was careful to go just the way she had come. She looked among the dry leaves in the gutters, under the parked cars, and all over the sidewalk, but she didn’t find the button. At the school Sandy turned around and started back toward home again. She kept on searching for the button.

“What are you looking for?” Janet Kramer had come out of an apartment house on the corner. She was carrying roller skates.

“A button,” Sandy said. She wasn’t sure she liked Janet. She was a nosy kid, always wanting to know everything, and full of advice.

“Oh,” Janet said. “I see. It’s off your coat. Those buttons with anchors on them are common. I’ll bet we have some in our button bag. Come into my house and I’ll look.”

Sandy wondered if Janet had meant that the button was cheap, but she followed the other girl through the brick gate into the apartment house.

Janet’s apartment was on the first floor. She had a key to her front door. “Mom’s still at work,” Janet said. She left the skates by

the door.

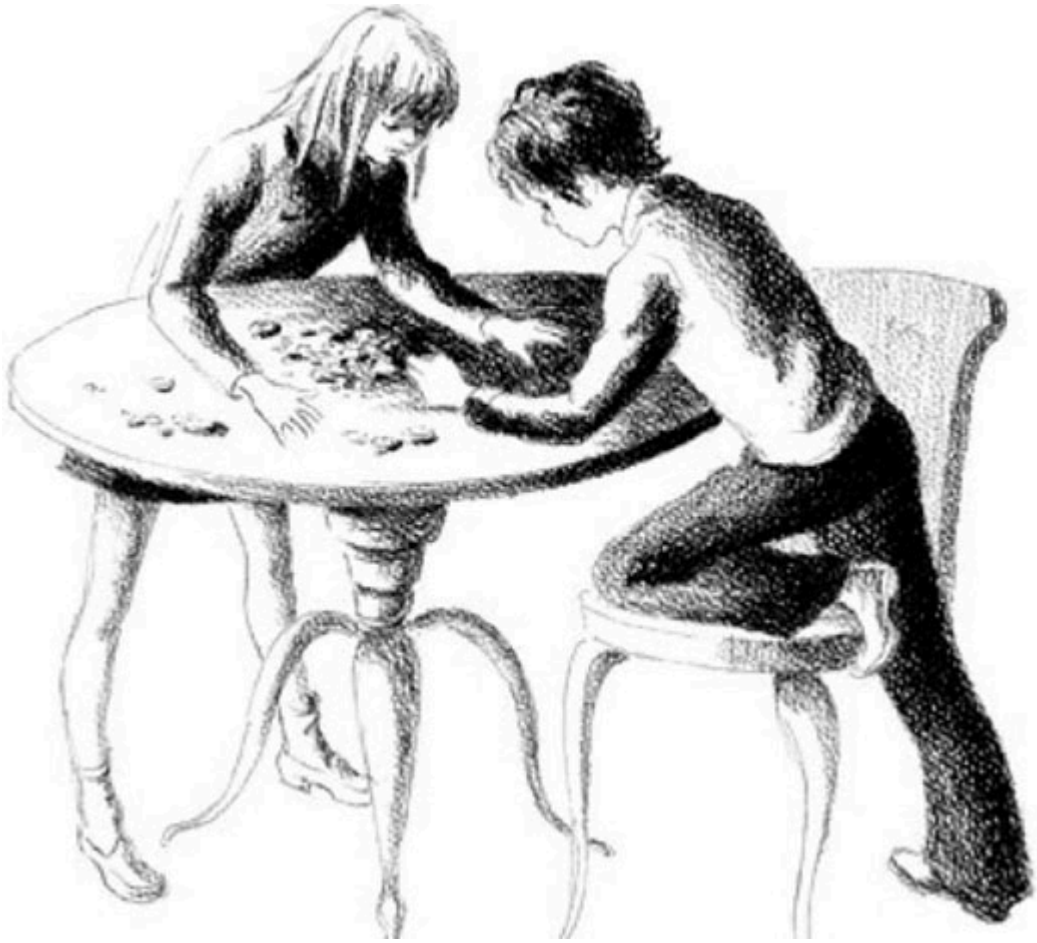
The button bag was in the bottom of a sewing cabinet. It was an old canvas bag filled with dozens of buttons of all kinds. Janet dumped them out onto the kitchen table, and the two girls began to search through them.

“My grandmother used to cut buttons off old clothes and save them,” Janet explained. “She gave Mom this bag.”

Sandy was so interested in the buttons that she almost forgot to look for one to match those on her coat. Some of the buttons had animals carved on them. Some had pieces of colored glass like jewels. Sandy found one made of bone. It was shaped like a little man.

Janet picked out three brass buttons with anchors on them. The first was too small. The second had a dark background behind the anchor. The ring on the back of the third was broken.

“No luck,” Janet said. She began to scoop up the buttons and throw them back into the bag.



Sandy held onto the one shaped like a little man.

“That wouldn’t look right on your coat, Sandy,” Janet said, “but you can have it if you want it. Maybe you could use it on a Halloween costume.”

“Thanks.” Sandy put the button into her pocket. “But what shall I do about my coat button?”

“They sell buttons in the trimming store on Thirteenth Avenue,” Janet said.

“I have a quarter.” Sandy put her hand into her pocket. She felt the quarter, and she felt the button. The button seemed to twist in her hand. She pulled it out and looked at it. There was a grin on the little man’s face. Sandy almost dropped the button. “Janet,” she whispered, “it’s alive!”

“Don’t be silly,” Janet said. “Come on. We have to get to the trimming store before it closes.”

2

Thirteenth Avenue in Brooklyn is crowded with all kinds of little stores. Many of them show much of their goods in cardboard boxes on the sidewalk. Sandy and Janet passed stalls of fresh vegetables and stands where dried fish were sold.

On Friday afternoon the Jewish-owned stores close before sundown. The two girls reached the trimming store while it was still open. They walked through the narrow aisles, past the counters covered with gold braid, ball fringe, lace of all colors, and boxes of sequins. At the back of the store a young man with a beard was talking to a little gray-haired woman.

“No,” he said. “I don’t have any old or unusual buttons. We only stock what is most asked for. You might try an antiques shop. Sorry I can’t help you.” The young man turned to Sandy. “What can I do for you, young lady?”

Sandy pointed to the buttons on her coat. “Please,” she said, “do you have a button to match these?”

The young man made his face very solemn. “Well,” he said, with a wink at the little gray-haired lady who was still standing at the counter, “I don’t know. Those are very rare.”

“He thinks he’s funny,” Janet whispered. “Look at the box on the shelf behind him.”

Sandy saw a box with four sizes of buttons just like hers glued to the side of it. She felt in her pocket for the quarter. By mistake she took out the little bone button that was shaped like a man.

Before she could put the button away, a musical voice said, “Just a minute, please. May I see that?”

It was the little gray-haired woman. Sandy looked at her. She had a round face with a curvy mouth, a pointed nose, and wide-set greeny-blue eyes. She held out her hand for the button. Sandy thought she could feel the button squirm.

Sandy held the little button-man up for the woman to see, but she kept a tight grip on it.

The young man with the beard put the box of brass buttons on the counter. “Let’s look in here.”

Janet fished out one of the right size. “How much is this?” she asked. She nudged Sandy to pay attention.

“They’re six for a dollar,” the young man said.

“I only need one.” Sandy put the button-man back into her pocket and took out the quarter.

The young man smiled. “We’ll make it ten cents.” He took the quarter and gave Sandy a dime and a nickel change. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have to close the store.”

The girls left the trimming store. Janet said, “He turned out to be a nice guy after all. Only I wish people wouldn’t tease.”

Sandy and Janet walked back down Thirteenth Avenue. They passed the carpet store and walked between the tall rolls of

linoleum which stood on the sidewalk. When they came to the Italian bakery they stopped to look at the pastry in the window.

"Sandy," Janet whispered, "isn't that the woman who was in the trimming store? Do you think she's following us?"

Sandy looked. The little gray-haired woman was coming toward them. Sandy began to walk fast. Janet ran after her. "What's the matter, Sandy?"

"She wants the magic button," Sandy said.

Janet made a face. "Oh, Sandy!" Then she said, "Anyway, it's a game. Come on. Let's run."

The two girls chased down the busy street, zig-zagging around the barrels of fish and baskets of pumpkins. It was getting dark. No matter how fast they ran the little woman was always right behind them. By the time they reached Sandy's house, both girls were out of breath.

"Bye, Sandy." Janet streaked toward home.

Sandy ran up her front steps and rang the bell. Her mother opened the door. "You were gone a long time," Mrs. James said. "Did you find the button?"

Sandy stepped inside her house, shut the door behind her, and leaned against it. She took the new brass button with the anchor on it out of her pocket and gave it to her mother.

3

After supper Mrs. James said, “Sandy, Daddy and I are going to the movies. I want you to baby-sit for Lisa.”

Sandy hated baby-sitting. “Oh, Mother!” she said.

“You should be glad to help your mother, Sandra,” Mr. James told her. “She needs a rest sometimes.”

“What shall I do if Lisa cries, Mother?” Sandy asked.

“Give her the bottle of milk I have ready in the refrigerator,” Mrs. James said. “Be sure to warm it first.”

When her mother and father had gone, Sandy tiptoed upstairs to the baby’s room to make sure her sister was still asleep. Lisa lay on her stomach. Her eyes were closed. The baby’s feet were sticking out from under the pink blanket. Sandy pulled the blanket over them and quietly left the room.

She remembered the little button-man. Sandy had left it in her coat pocket. Her mother had sewn on the new brass button and hung the coat in the hall closet.

Sandy went downstairs to the closet and felt in the coat pocket. The button was still there. She pulled out the little man and looked at it. Each feature of the tiny face was perfect. The little man had a short nose and a long chin. Was he smiling? Sandy couldn't be sure. His clothes looked like those the Pilgrim Fathers wore in Thanksgiving pictures.

Sandy turned the button over. The back was carved just as nicely as the front. In the middle was a loop to sew the button on.

It was an interesting button, but there was really nothing strange about it, Sandy decided. She wondered now why it had seemed magic.

Sandy had an idea. She could wear the button around her neck. She went to the kitchen drawer and found a piece of string. Sandy tried to push the end of the string through the loop on the back of the button. She couldn't get it to go through. At last she took a darning needle from her mother's workbox and threaded it with the string. She poked the needle through the loop and pulled the string after it. Before Sandy could hang the string around her neck, she heard Lisa start to cry.

Sandy ran upstairs to the baby's room. Lisa had rolled over onto her back. Her eyes were still shut, but her mouth was open. Her face was red, and she was howling. When Sandy came into the room the baby opened her eyes and stopped crying for a moment. Then she opened her mouth to start again.

Sandy swung the button on the string in front of the baby. Lisa shut her mouth and made a grab for the button.

The telephone rang downstairs. Sandy tied the string to the top bar of the baby's crib and gave the button a push. It swung gently back and forth.

Sandy ran downstairs to answer the phone. "Hello," she said.

"Hello, Sandy." It was Janet's voice.

"Oh, hi, Janet. I just found a good use for that button you gave me. It keeps my baby sister from crying."

“Be careful she doesn’t swallow it,” Janet said. “Sandy, it’s about that button that I want to talk to you.”

“Oh,” Sandy said, “you want it back.”

“Not exactly,” Janet told her. “But, remember the woman who followed us this afternoon? Well, she caught up to me after you went into your house.”

“How?” Sandy asked. “You sure were running fast.”

There was a silence while Janet thought about this. Then she said, “All I know is she grabbed hold of my arm.”

“Weren’t you scared?” Sandy asked.

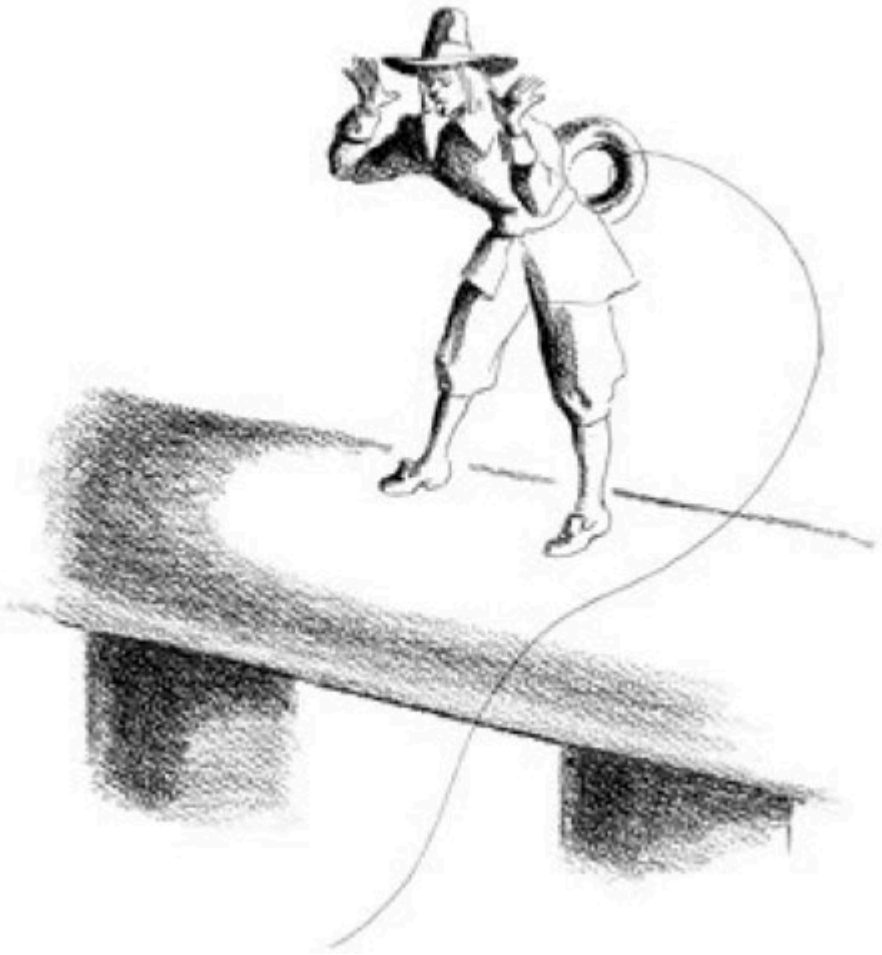
“Scared of what? She’s just an old lady who collects buttons—kind of a nice old lady. She wants me to tell you she’ll pay five dollars for that button I gave you. It’s an antique.”

Sandy didn’t say anything for a minute. Janet had given her the button without knowing how much it was worth. At last Sandy said, “If you want the button back, Janet, I’ll give it to you.”

“Oh, Sandy, I didn’t say I wanted it back,” Janet said. “Now you’re mad at me. And we were just getting to be friends.”

Sandy heard the baby start to cry. “I have to take care of my sister, Janet,” she said. “I’m not mad. Come over tomorrow. We’ll decide what to do about the button. Bye.” Sandy hung up the telephone and raced upstairs to Lisa’s room.

The baby was looking up at the little button-man. He was no longer swinging by the string. Instead he was standing on the top bar of the crib, waving his arms and making faces at the baby.



As soon as Sandy came into the room, the little man toppled off the bar. Once more he was just a button swinging on the end of a string. Lisa stopped screaming.

There was only one thing to do. Sandy walked over to the crib and untied the string from the bar. She held the button up by the string and stared into the tiny face. “There’s no use pretending you’re just an ordinary button,” she said. “I saw you sticking out your tongue at my sister.”

The button didn’t move. Sandy held it close to her ear. “Can you talk?”

There was no answer.

“Maybe I ought to sell you to the woman who offered five dollars for you,” Sandy said.

Suddenly the button gave a sharp twist in her hand. Sandy heard a shriek. “Five dollars! What an insult! Can’t you tell that woman is a witch?”

Sandy almost dropped the button. “No need to scream,” she said. She held the button in front of her and looked at it.

The little man had his hands on his hips. His eyes flashed under his wide-brimmed hat. He didn’t look like a button at all.

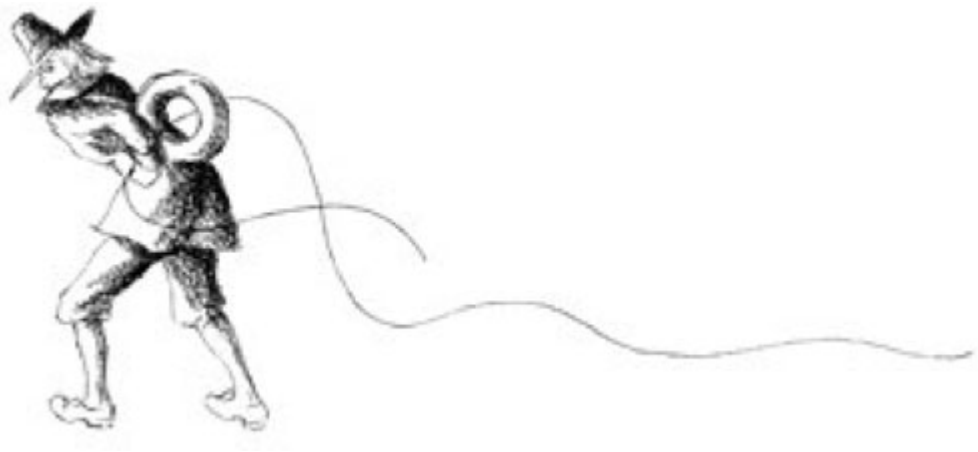
“Who are you?” Sandy asked.

The little man didn’t answer.

“If you don’t want to tell me I may as well sell you to the Witch.” Sandy looked to see what effect her words had.

“Oh, I suppose I may as well tell you everything. Only first put me down, and take this rope off me. I feel like a fish on a line.” The little man reached behind him to grab at the string.

Sandy pulled the string out of the loop in the little man’s back. She set him down again on the top bar of the crib. The baby watched everything with big dark eyes.



The little button-man sat down on the bar and crossed his legs. “First of all,” he said, “my name is Silas. As you may have guessed, I wasn’t always a button.”

“Why does the Witch want you so much?” Sandy asked.

Silas frowned. “Don’t interrupt,” he said. “It’s rude.”

Sandy thought it rude of him to say so, but she waited for him to continue.

He stretched his arms, crossed and uncrossed his legs several times, fiddled with the wide collar of his coat, and then said, “I was once a person like you.”

“What happened?” Sandy asked, forgetting that he didn’t like to be interrupted.

Silas didn’t answer. He rested his long chin in his hands and seemed to be thinking hard. At last he said, “I spent so many years shut up in that awful button bag that I can hardly remember what happened before.” He wrinkled his eyebrows and scratched his head. “I remember that I was sewn to a fur cloak for ages. It never seemed to wear out. That cloak was handed down from mother to

daughter to granddaughter. How I hated it. Once long long ago a little boy kept me for a good-luck charm." Silas smiled. "Maybe I *was* lucky for him. He lived to be a very old man, and he always carried me in his waistcoat pocket. I was nearly buried with him, but his granddaughter found me and sewed me to the fur cloak."

This was all interesting, but it didn't answer any of Sandy's questions. She still wanted to know about the Witch.

Silas stood up and yawned. "I've had a tiring day," he said. "Do you have somewhere for me to sleep? And please," he added, "don't put me among buttons."

Suddenly Sandy felt sorry for him. She picked up the little man and carried him down the hall to her bedroom. She put him in the top of the box of Kleenex on her dresser. "How's that?"

Silas snuggled down between two sheets of Kleenex. "Don't wake me early," he said. "I have a lot of sleep to catch up on."

Sandy heard Lisa start to scream. She ran downstairs to warm the milk for the baby.

In the morning when Mrs. James came to wake Sandy, she saw Silas in the Kleenex box. “What’s this?” She picked him up. “It’s a button. Sandy, wouldn’t this be just right for the snowsuit I knitted for Lisa?”

Sandy sat up in bed. “Janet Kramer gave it to me yesterday, Mother. It’s an antique and worth a lot. I think I ought to give it back to her.”

Mrs. James put Silas down on the dresser top. “Janet called for you already this morning. I told her you weren’t awake yet. I wanted you to sleep late after staying up baby-sitting last night.” Mrs. James left the room. She had to feed Lisa her breakfast.

Sandy jumped out of bed and began to dress as fast as she could. Before she went downstairs she put Silas into the pocket of her jeans. “Good morning,” she whispered.

“Maybe for you it is,” came a voice from her pocket. “I could have used a bit more sleep.”

“Take a nap in my pocket,” Sandy suggested.

After swallowing her orange juice and gobbling a bowl of cereal, Sandy put on an old jacket.

“Where are you going, Sandy?” her mother asked. She was trying to spoon strained peaches into Lisa’s mouth. Most of the food seemed to land on the baby’s bib or on her chin.

“I’m going to Janet’s house, Mother,” Sandy said. “I’ll be home for lunch.”

“All right, Sandy. Have fun.” Mrs. James tried again to get the spoon into the baby’s mouth. Lisa grabbed the spoon with both hands. The peaches splashed onto her mother’s apron.

Sandy closed the front door behind her. She looked up and down the tree-lined street. There was no sign of the Witch.

Sandy walked the two blocks to the red brick apartment building where Janet lived. Janet was outside, putting on her roller skates. “I’ll put these away,” she said, “unless you want to go skating, Sandy. I’m sorry I can’t ask you to come into the house. Saturday is Mom’s house-cleaning day. She likes me to stay out of her way.” Janet went into the building and came out a minute later without the skates.

“Where’s the Witch?” Sandy asked.

“The Witch?” Janet didn’t understand.

“The woman who wants the button,” Sandy explained. “I have to tell you what happened last night, Janet. Come on. We’ll go for a walk.”

“You were using the button to amuse your baby sister,” Janet said. “I wish I had a baby sister. My mother won’t even let me have a kitten. She says she doesn’t have time to take care of one.”

“Meow!” A little black kitten ran from under a parked car to rub against Janet’s legs. She stooped down and picked it up.

“Oh, Sandy, did you ever see such a pretty kitten?” Janet held the kitten up for Sandy to see.

Sandy looked into a pair of wide-set greeny-blue eyes. She had a funny feeling that she had seen those eyes before.

“Tell me about last night, Sandy.” Janet put the kitten on the sidewalk. The two girls started to walk down the street. Sandy looked back. The kitten was following them.

Sandy told Janet all about Silas. Janet listened without saying anything.

“You don’t believe me, do you, Janet?” Sandy said. She took Silas out of her pocket and gave him to Janet.

Janet looked hard at the button. She turned it over and looked at the loop on the back. “I don’t understand how it can move. There are no joints. It’s just a solid piece of bone.” She rubbed the little man’s stomach.

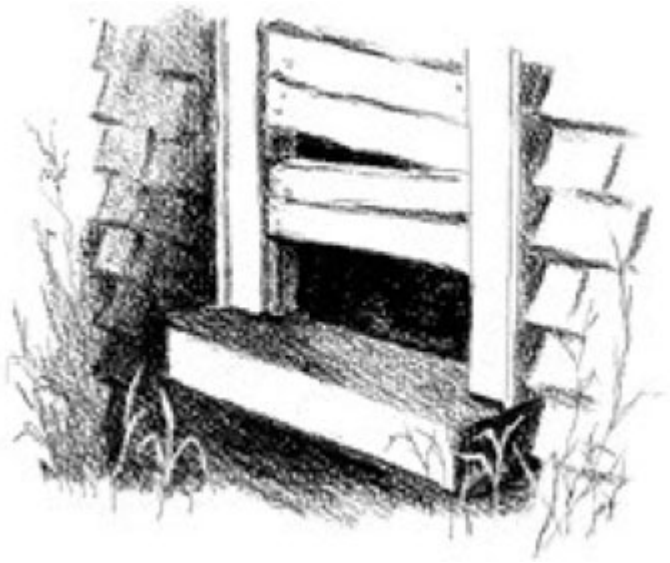
“Stop that!” Silas said sharply. Janet was so startled that she dropped him.

There was a flash of black fur. The kitten pounced upon the button. She grabbed him in her mouth and raced down the street. The two girls chased after.

The kitten crossed Church Avenue. Luckily the traffic light was green. Sandy and Janet ran across the street.

By the time they had gone three blocks, Sandy had a stitch in her side. She kept on running. Two blocks farther on she noticed an old house. It was different from the other houses on the street. This one was long and low with a chimney on each side. All the windows were boarded up. It didn't look as if anyone lived there.

The kitten ran around to the back of the old house. Sandy and Janet followed. They saw her scramble under a loose board on one of the windows and disappear inside.



Janet grabbed hold of the board the kitten had gone under. The wood was rotten, and the board came off in Janet's hand. The board above it was rotten too. Janet pried that one off as well. Now the space was big enough for the two girls to squeeze through.

"I'll go in first," Sandy whispered. She put her finger to her lips. "Try not to make any noise, Janet."

"Why?" Janet asked. "All we have to do is catch the kitten. It should be easier to do in a house than outdoors."

"I'm not sure I want to catch it," Sandy said in a low voice. She remembered now where she had seen those greeny-blue eyes.

"What do you mean?" Janet wanted to know.

"The kitten is the Witch," Sandy explained.

“Oh!” Janet stared at Sandy. “Of course! That’s why she grabbed the button. Maybe we shouldn’t go into the house, Sandy.”

“We have to rescue Silas.” Sandy bent down and crawled through the window.

Janet took a deep breath and followed her.

The girls found themselves in a huge old-fashioned kitchen. One whole wall was a stone fireplace. An enormous iron pot hung by a hook over the fire. Something was bubbling and steaming in the pot. The steam rising from it was soft and pink. As the girls watched, it turned to violet, then blue. Suddenly the pot gave a loud hiss. Bright green steam rose in clouds.

Sandy and Janet jumped back. They heard footsteps. Sandy got down on her hands and knees and crawled into a low cupboard. Janet came after her.

The cupboard smelled good. There was a basket of apples back in one corner. Janet left the cupboard door open a crack so that she and Sandy could peek out.

Someone was singing in a sweet voice. The little gray-haired woman they had met in the button shop came dancing into the room. She was dressed all in black now. Sandy noticed that her little feet were in shoes with big buckles on them. They were a lot like the shoes that Silas wore. The Witch seemed excited. She twirled all around the big kitchen.

“Stop it, Betsy!” It was Silas’ voice. “You’re up to something. I can tell by the way you’re acting.”

Now Janet and Sandy saw that the Witch was holding the little button-man in her hand. He was kicking and struggling.

The Witch walked over to the steaming pot. She looked into it. “Yes, yes, it’s nearly at the right stage.” She hummed for a minute. Then she said, “Now, now, Silas, this will all be over in a moment.”

The girls watched in horror as the Witch dropped Silas into the pot. There was a bang like a firecracker. The room filled with clouds of black smoke. Sandy and Janet put their hands over their mouths. They could hear the Witch coughing.

“Oh, dear,” she said. “I wish I could find a better method. How is it going, Silas?”

“How should I know?” they heard Silas say. “You and your sloppy spells!” His voice seemed very loud.

The smoke was clearing. Sandy blinked her eyes. She grabbed Janet’s hand and whispered, “Look!”

Something big and wet was rising out of the huge pot. Now the girls saw that it was a man. He wore a wide-brimmed hat and knee breeches. It was Silas!

The Witch clapped her hands. When Silas had climbed out of the pot she danced around and around him. “It worked! It worked!” she sang. “I wasn’t sure it would.”

“What would you have done if it hadn’t?” Silas snarled.

“Now, now, Silas. It took me ages to put together that brew. I had to melt some of my nicest buttons into it.”

“Good of you, dear sister,” Silas said. “But if you hadn’t turned me into a button in the first place, you wouldn’t have had to go to so much trouble to change me back.”

The Witch put her hand on her brother’s arm. “Let’s have no hard feelings, Silas,” she said. “I did it for your own good. I thought it would teach you a lesson. You were always meddling with my button collection. I meant to change you back to yourself after a week. How was I to know that horrid little boy would find you and put you into his pocket? I followed him around for years trying to get you away from him. And you didn’t help.”

Silas shook her hand off. He glared at his sister. “I couldn’t be sure what you would do if you got your hands on me. At least the boy kept me safe.” He looked around the kitchen. “A fine state you’ve let the house get into, Betsy. All you ever think of are your precious buttons.”

The Witch caught sight of the window from which Janet had pulled the two boards. “I must have knocked those boards off when I came in,” she said. “I was rather in a hurry. You’ll find the

hammer and the nails where we always kept them, Silas. Make yourself useful."

He glared. "After three hundred years as a button, I'm supposed to be useful! I never did like this old house. It can fall apart for all I care."

"You know I didn't *have* to change you back," the Witch said. Then she laughed. "Oh, if only you could have seen your face when I held you over the pot! What did you think I was going to do to you?"

"Nothing I wouldn't do to you, dear sister," Silas muttered. He stamped out of the kitchen.

Witch Betsy hummed to herself for a minute. Then she said, "Oh, dear, I hope he doesn't find my buttons." She chased after her brother.

"Quick!" Sandy whispered. "We've got to get out of here before they nail those boards back."

Janet crawled first out of the cupboard, and Sandy scrambled after her. The two girls stood up and ran to the window. A moment later they were outside. They tore around the house to the street and ran toward home.

After they crossed Beverly Road they slowed down. And while they were waiting for the Church Avenue traffic light to change, Sandy pulled two red apples out of the front of her jacket. She grinned. "I swiped these. After all, Witch Betsy swiped our button."

Janet looked at Sandy with admiration. "Wow!" she said. "You sure have a lot of nerve." She took one of the apples and bit into it. "Delicious," she said.

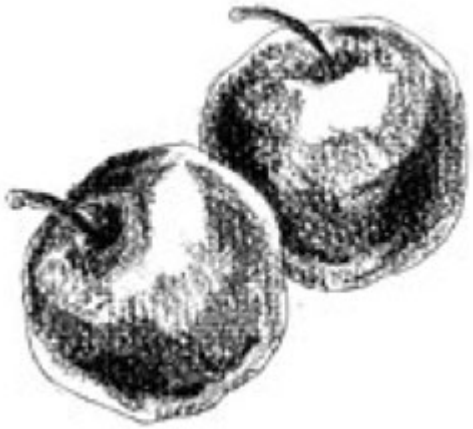
Sandy crunched her way through the other apple. It was hard and sweet and tasted better than anything she could remember. When she finished it she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

The traffic light had changed now. Sandy crossed the street and looked around for Janet. She didn't see her anywhere.

Sandy waited for a minute. Then she walked back across Church Avenue to look for her friend. Funny. Where could Janet have gone?

Sandy had begun to like Janet. This was such a stupid trick. Maybe Janet thought it was funny, but Sandy didn't. Once again she

crossed the busy street and walked slowly home.



Sandy walked up the front steps of her house and rang the doorbell. Mrs. James opened the door and looked out. Then she frowned and shut the door.

Sandy didn't know what to think. Either her mother had gone crazy or she had gone blind. Both these thoughts were scary, but Mrs. James didn't seem to have even noticed Sandy.

She decided to ring the bell again. This time she meant to walk into the house before her mother could close the door. If there was something wrong with her mother somebody had to take care of the baby.

Sandy tried to feel brave. She looked at the push button for the bell and then put her finger on it. But Sandy didn't press the button. She just stared at it. Now she knew what was wrong. She couldn't see her finger!

Sandy looked down at where she knew her jacket was. She couldn't see it, or her jeans, or her feet. If she couldn't see herself, her mother couldn't either. Sandy was invisible!

What could have happened? Sandy sat down on her front steps and thought for a long time. She tried to remember everything that had taken place that morning. Did the Witch know somehow that Sandy was hiding in her kitchen? In some way she had enchanted her. Was Janet enchanted too?

Of course Janet was invisible too! She hadn't hidden from Sandy. Most likely she thought Sandy had hidden from her. Janet must have gone home alone too. But Janet had a key to her front door.

Sandy stood up and started to walk to the apartment building where Janet lived. It felt strange to pass people she knew and not have them say hello. She saw Jerry Meyer who sat beside her in school. He was always hiding her eraser or turning the pages in her reader so she'd lose her place.

Sandy grabbed Jerry's cap and ran down the street. Jerry chased after the cap. Sandy dodged back and forth with it. She put it on the sidewalk and waited.

When Jerry reached for the cap, Sandy snatched it up. Jerry's mouth was open. His eyes were popping out. Sandy thought he looked just like a frog. She ran around the corner and hid the cap on a windowsill. Jerry looked everywhere for it. Finally Sandy picked up the cap and set it on Jerry's head. She pulled it down over his eyes and walked away.

Sandy went into Janet's apartment building and rang Janet's bell. Janet's mother opened the door. Sandy ducked under Mrs. Kramer's arm and rushed into the hall of the apartment. She spread her arms wide and walked around all the rooms as if she were an airplane. This way, she told herself, even if she couldn't see Janet, she'd be sure to bump into her.

Mrs. Kramer shut the front door and muttered, "They're rushing Halloween."

Sandy found one door that was shut. She opened it quietly and went in, closing the door behind her. She was in a frilly pink and white bedroom with a four-poster bed in the middle. It was just the sort of room Sandy had always longed for.

She noticed a hollow in the middle of the bed.

"Janet!" Sandy whispered.

The bedsprings creaked.

"Oh, Sandy, is it you? What's happened?" Janet's voice said.

Sandy sat down on the bed. "We're invisible, Janet. The Witch must have enchanted us."

"But how, Sandy? We were all right when we left her house. It wasn't till we got to Church Avenue that anything happened. I looked around for you, and you were gone."

Sandy was quiet for a minute. Then she said, "Janet, do you suppose it could have been those apples I swiped?"

"Maybe," Janet said. "The important thing is: What are we going to do about it?"

Sandy looked around the pretty room. There was a pink telephone on the white and gold table near the bed. "Janet, may I use your phone?" Sandy asked.

"Of course. Are you going to call Witch Betsy and ask her to take off the enchantment?"

"No," Sandy said, "but it's not a bad idea." She took the receiver off the hook and dialed her home number.

Her mother answered the phone.

"Hello, Mother," Sandy said. "I'm at Janet's house. Please may I stay here for lunch?"

"All right, Sandy," her mother said, "but don't be late for supper."

Sandy hung up the telephone. She told Janet what had happened when she tried to go home. “At least this way my mother won’t worry when I don’t come home for lunch,” she said. “What about your mother, Janet? Won’t she wonder where you are?”

Sandy heard the bedsprings creak again. The hollow in the bed became flat. A chair moved back from the desk in the corner of the room. The pen on top of the desk flew up into the air and then settled, point down, on the desk top. It started to write on a sheet of paper.

“I’m writing a note for Mom,” Janet said. “I’ll leave it on the kitchen table. Come on. We’ll get something to eat before we go.”

“Where are we going?” Sandy asked.

“To see Witch Betsy, of course,” Janet said. “I’m sure she’ll help us. She doesn’t seem like a bad witch at all. If you want to know, I like her a lot better than that nasty brother of hers.”

Sandy wanted to be loyal to Silas, but deep inside her she felt that Janet was right.

The girls tiptoed out of the bedroom and went to the kitchen. Mrs. Kramer was in the living room, vacuuming the rug. She didn’t notice the door of Janet’s room open and then close again.

Janet put the note she had written on the kitchen table. She took a container of milk out of the refrigerator and filled two glasses. Then she opened a fresh loaf of bread and pulled out four slices. “Hope you like baloney.” She made two sandwiches. Janet handed one sandwich to Sandy and took a bite out of the other.

The girls sat down at the kitchen table and ate as fast as they could. Suddenly the sound of the vacuum cleaner stopped. They could hear footsteps.

"Drink up your milk and hide your sandwich," Janet whispered.

Sandy stuffed her sandwich into her pocket. As soon as it was inside her clothes it became invisible too. Janet's mother came into the kitchen just as Sandy was putting her empty glass on the table.

Mrs. Kramer stared. She walked over to the table and saw Janet's note.

Dear Mom,
I am invisible, but otherwise healthy.
Don't worry about me.
You'll see me just as soon as I get to be visible again.

Love,
Janet

Mrs. Kramer looked at the two empty milk glasses on the table. "I was sure I saw one of them move," she said to herself. She read Janet's note again. She put her hand to her forehead. "I'm tired, and my head hurts. I'd better take a nap." Mrs. Kramer went to her room to lie down.

Sandy and Janet finished eating their sandwiches and left the apartment.

10

"That's funny." Sandy looked at the back window of the Witch's house. "The two boards are still off."

"Betsy was after Silas to nail them back," Janet said. "He's had plenty of time to do it."

Sandy grabbed Janet by the arm. "Listen!"

They could hear loud footsteps inside the house. A door banged. Then there was a crash. Someone said something in a harsh voice. It sounded like Silas.

"Maybe we shouldn't go in right now," Janet said. "It sounds as if they're having a fight."

The big yard of the old house was overgrown with weeds. Sandy and Janet crouched down in them. A moment later someone banged off another board from the kitchen window. Silas came bursting out. His wide-brimmed hat fell off his head. He had to stoop over to pick it up.

Janet and Sandy held their breath. Silas was very tall now. His clothes were black, and his face was red and angry. “Don’t worry, sister dear, I’ll find the rest of your buttons,” he said. He didn’t seem to be talking to himself, but the girls couldn’t see anyone else. Silas stamped through the weeds to the front of the house. They saw him turn and go down the street toward Church Avenue.

“I’m glad he’s gone,” Janet said. “Now let’s talk to Witch Betsy. By the way, Sandy, why are we hiding? We’re invisible.”

“Oh,” Sandy said. “I forgot.”

They stepped over the windowsill into the kitchen. It was much easier to get into the house now that Silas had knocked off another board.

The fire had gone out under the big pot. Sunlight poured into the kitchen through the unboarded window. The big room looked quite different.

Janet led the way out of the kitchen. They found themselves in a hall with a room on each side of it. They peeked through the doorways. The rooms were furnished with plain, old-fashioned furniture. One room was a parlor. The other was a dining room. They were covered with dust and cobwebs as if nobody ever used them anymore. Both rooms had fireplaces, but they looked as if nobody had made a fire in them for many years.

A big staircase led up from the hall near the front door. Janet put her hand on the bannister. It wobbled. She started up the stairs, one step at a time, listening for any sound upstairs. On the landing she stopped and waited for Sandy to catch up with her.

“Maybe we ought to call the Witch,” Sandy said. “Even if we are invisible, I’m not sure I want to surprise her. She might do something she’d be sorry for later. Remember what she did to Silas.”

Janet nodded, forgetting that Sandy couldn’t see her nod. She swallowed once. Then she called in a low voice, “Betsy!”

No answer.

Now Sandy called, louder, “Betsy, please come out. You can’t see us, but we’re on the stairs. We want to talk to you.”

Still no answer. The girls went upstairs. There was a sudden rustle and the sound of scurrying feet. Something ran across the upstairs

hall and into one of the rooms. Janet jumped. Then she laughed. “It’s only a mouse.”

There were four rooms opening off the hall. Sandy and Janet peeked into all of them. They looked as if a frantic search had been going on. Chairs were overturned. Drawers were pulled out onto the floor. The covers had been yanked off the beds. The girls couldn’t see the Witch anywhere.

Sandy opened a door in the corner of the back bedroom. She found a narrow stair. With Janet close behind her, holding onto her jacket, Sandy went down the steps. When she opened the door at the bottom they walked into the kitchen.

“Now what do we do?” Janet asked.

Sandy walked over to the big pot. She leaned over it and sniffed. “It smells like nail polish remover.”

There was a small blue bottle with a cork in it on a shelf above the fireplace. Sandy uncorked the bottle and dipped it into the pot. She filled it to the brim and stuffed the cork back. Then she put the bottle into the pocket of her jeans.

“Nail polish remover is good for all sorts of things,” she said. “Did you know it will take off the stickum left by a Band-Aid?”

“I can’t stand the smell of nail polish remover,” Janet said. She dipped her finger into the pot and then looked at it. “It doesn’t work either.”

“Of course not,” Sandy told her. “It’s cold. Are there any matches here?”

“Witch Betsy probably rubs two sticks together to make a fire,” Janet said.

“No, she doesn’t.” Sandy held up a box of wooden kitchen matches. “We’re in luck, but even with these I’m not sure I can get a fire started.”

There was a box of wood in one corner of the kitchen. Janet had spent two weeks at Girl Scout Camp last summer. She showed Sandy how to make a fire without newspaper.

Sandy watched with interest. She couldn’t see Janet at all, and the sticks of wood seemed to move by themselves. Soon the fire was crackling. As it burned higher, the brew in the big iron pot started to bubble. Then a pale gray steam began to rise from it.

Moments later the steam had turned pink, then violet, then blue. With the loud hiss they remembered, the pot poured forth bright green steam.

“I think it’s ready,” Janet said in a shaky voice, “but I don’t want to get into that pot. Suppose something went wrong? I’d be boiled alive.”

Sandy took a long-handled spoon from a hook over the fireplace. She dipped the spoon into the brew and splashed a drop onto the back of her hand, just as she did when she tested the baby’s milk. When the drop of brew touched her hand it made a little popping sound. The liquid felt cool.

“Oh, Janet, look!” Sandy said. “It works!” She held up her hand. A little pink round spot of Sandy was visible.

“I don’t care,” Janet said. “I’m not going to mess around with that stuff.”

“It’s not hot, Janet. Feel it.” Sandy dipped the spoon into the pot and splashed a large spoonful of the brew in the direction of Janet’s voice.

There was a crackling like a string of firecrackers going off. Suddenly parts of Janet were visible. Sandy could see a bit of Janet’s red jacket, the bottom half of her left ear, part of a shoelace, and one angry eye.

“Warn me before you do that again,” Janet said. “You’re wasting the brew this way, Sandy. If we run out of it, I’ll be a walking jigsaw

puzzle."

"You're right, Janet," Sandy said. "We'd better just get into the pot." She closed her mouth and squinched her eyes shut. "Here goes." Sandy stepped into the steaming brew.

Bang! The room was filled with black smoke. Janet didn't know whether to cough or to scream. She decided not to do either. Seconds later she watched Sandy come dripping but visible out of the brew.

Janet took a deep breath and stepped into the pot.

Sandy was home in plenty of time for supper. Her mother looked very happy. She opened the door and gave Sandy a hug.

"Did you have a good day, Sandy?" she asked.

"Yes," Sandy said. "I like Janet Kramer."

"Maybe she'll come over tonight and keep you company when you baby-sit. I know it isn't fair to ask you to do it two nights in a row, but the Thompsons asked us over. We haven't been to see them in ages."

Sandy walked into the house and closed the front door. Her mother went on talking. "You and Janet can bake cookies if you want to."

"Oh, could I, Mother? That would be great." Sandy loved to cook.

"I'll ask Janet's mother to let her spend the night." Mrs. James walked over to the telephone. "What's her number?"

Sandy told her mother Janet's telephone number. She took off her jacket and went to hang it in the hall closet.

When she came back her mother was humming and setting the table. "Janet is coming over for supper," Mrs. James said. "Shall we use the good china?"

Supper was like a party. Both Sandy's father and Janet told jokes. Lisa sat in her high chair and chewed on a piece of zwieback and didn't scream even once.

While everybody but Lisa was eating apple pie, Mrs. James said, “I had a piece of good luck this afternoon. A man came to the house selling buttons. Usually I don’t bother with people like that, but he was so strange looking that I felt sorry for him. I don’t think he was quite right in the head. Well, the very first thing he showed me was exactly what I need for the snowsuit I made for Lisa. It’s a bit like that button Janet gave you, Sandy. Just think, the poor man only wanted to charge me a penny. I gave him a quarter for it.”

“Is that why you were so happy this afternoon, Mother?” Sandy asked. “I’m glad you got a button you like.”

“Funny thing. The man made me promise to sew the button onto the snowsuit right away. But I just haven’t had the time. I’ll sew it on tomorrow.” Mrs. James poured herself a second cup of coffee.

When dinner was over, Janet and Sandy started to load the dishwasher.

“Leave the pans,” Mrs. James said. “I’ll scrub them in the morning.” She carried Lisa upstairs to bed and then went to get her hat and coat. Mr. James was all ready to go. He was waiting for her in the front hall.

When her parents had gone out, Sandy said, “Lisa ought to start crying any minute now. She just waits for my mother to leave.”

“I don’t hear anything,” Janet said. “Don’t be silly, Sandy. She’s a darling baby.”

Sandy closed the dishwasher and turned it on. “We’ll sneak upstairs and see if she’s asleep.”

Silently the two girls crept upstairs to the baby’s room. Mrs. James had left a little lamp on, and the door was open.

Sandy and Janet heard someone singing a lullaby in a low sweet voice. They peeked into the room. Lisa lay on her stomach in the crib. They could see that her eyes were almost closed. In a moment she would be asleep.

The new snowsuit was on top of the dresser. Right beside it stood a little figure.

Her clothes weren't black anymore, and she seemed to be made of bone. But there was no doubt who it was. Witch Betsy was singing the baby to sleep.

12

Sandy opened her mouth to say something. Witch Betsy saw her and put her finger to her lips. Lisa's eyelashes fluttered and then lay still on her cheeks. The baby was asleep.

Betsy walked to the edge of the dresser and looked down. It was a long way to the floor. She held out her arms the way Lisa did when

she wanted to be picked up. Janet tiptoed into the room and gently lifted the little Witch. She carried her downstairs.

Sandy walked over to the crib to make sure that her sister was all right. Lisa seemed to be having a happy dream. She smiled in her sleep.

Sandy had read stories about witches who stole babies. When she went downstairs she found Janet in the kitchen. Witch Betsy was sitting on the edge of the table, swinging her legs.

"You must like babies a lot to turn yourself into a button for a baby's snowsuit," Sandy said to the Witch.

"I don't like babies any more than you do," Betsy said. "Babies like to be sung to, and I like to sing. Anyway, I didn't turn myself into a button. That copycat little brother of mine did it to me."

"Is Silas a witch too?" Sandy asked.

"Not a good one," Witch Betsy said. "He never thinks up his own spells, but he sometimes remembers mine."

"How did he turn you into a button?" Janet asked.

"I'd better not tell you," the Witch said. "It's so easy you might want to try it. The hard part is turning a button back into a person."

"But you don't seem to mind being a button," Sandy said.

Betsy climbed up onto the rim of a small saucepan that was on the table. Holding her arms out, she balanced herself like a tight-rope walker. "In some ways it's fun," the Witch said. "But once I'm sewn onto something I won't be able to move. I'll be just like any other button." Betsy balanced herself for a few steps. Suddenly she jumped down onto the tabletop. She stretched herself out on her stomach and buried her face in her hands. Her tiny shoulders shook. The Witch was crying.

Sandy couldn't bear it. "Don't cry," she said. "I'm sure we can do something to help you."

"Of course we can, Sandy," Janet said. "We can take Betsy back to her house and drop her into the pot of brew."

The Witch stopped crying. She sat up and wiped her eyes on the hem of her skirt. "You have to be careful of Silas," she said. "The way I am I wouldn't be able to help you. And what would we do if Silas turned both of you into buttons?"

Sandy was very quiet. She knew just how to help the Witch. But she remembered how happy her mother was to have the right button for Lisa's snowsuit. No matter what Sandy did, someone was going to be unhappy.

Sandy thought hard. She tried to imagine what it would be like for Betsy to be sewn onto the snowsuit and not to be able to move—or sing.

Sandy pulled the little blue bottle out of her pocket. She uncorked it and poured the brew into the little saucepan on the table. The smell of nail polish remover filled the room.

Witch Betsy clapped her hands and danced a jig on the tabletop. She watched as Sandy put the saucepan on the stove and turned on the burner.

Soon the magic brew bubbled. The steam began to change color. Sandy picked up the Witch and got ready to drop her into the saucepan.

"Sandy, stop!" Janet yelled. "You don't want a full-sized witch on top of your stove!"

Sandy put the pan from the apple pie on the floor. She set the Witch in the middle of it and poured the steaming brew over her.

There wasn't enough brew to make a very loud bang when Sandy poured it over the Witch. But it was loud enough to wake the baby. Before the black smoke cleared Lisa started to cry. Sandy ran out of the kitchen and hurried upstairs.

Lisa had rolled over onto her back. She was reaching out her arms toward the dresser top and howling. Sandy thought that it wasn't just her mother who would miss the magic button. Lisa missed it already.

Sandy picked up the baby and started to walk back and forth with her. Usually this made Lisa stop crying. Now she only screamed louder.

"Rock-a-bye baby, on the tree-top," a sweet voice sang. Lisa stopped crying and turned her head to see where the voice came from.

Betsy, dressed in black and back to her usual size, had come into the room. Janet was right behind her.

"I see what you mean about that baby, Sandy," Janet said. "I never thought anybody so small could make so much noise."

"She wants the magic button," Sandy explained.

Betsy stopped singing. "I never thought of that." She frowned. "Well, I can't spend all my time singing to your sister, Sandy. I have to go home and take care of my buttons. Silas found most of them, but I hid the best ones. I know he's going to keep on looking for them. Silas is such a nuisance."

"Turn him back into a button," Janet suggested.

“Can’t,” the Witch said. “The spell only works once.”

“If that’s how it is,” Janet said, “Silas can’t turn you into a button anymore either.”

Betsy smiled. “No, he can’t.”

Sandy was still walking up and down with the baby. Lisa had forgotten the button. She liked having people around her. The baby began to feel heavy to Sandy. She put her back into the crib. Lisa let out a yowl.

Janet leaned over Lisa and tickled her. “Let me mind her, Sandy.”

Betsy straightened one of her gray curls and shook out her full skirt. “I’d better be getting along home. Thank you both for helping me.”

“I wish you could stay,” Sandy said. “Janet and I are going to make cookies.”

“Cookies?” the Witch said. “I haven’t made cookies since Silas and I moved from Salem. Maybe I will stay.”

The pie pan was still on the kitchen floor. Most of the brew had steamed away. Sandy picked up the pie pan and set it on the kitchen table.

Janet put Lisa in her high chair so she could watch what was going on. Then Janet began to look through the cookbook. Sandy got out the flour, sugar, eggs, and butter. She turned on the oven and took a cookie sheet and two cookie cutters out of the cupboard.

Betsy was looking at everything in the kitchen. “Where’s your rolling pin?” she asked.

“I use a soda bottle,” Sandy said. She took one out of the refrigerator and handed it to the Witch.

Betsy began to sing, “Run, run, as fast as you can. You can’t catch me. I’m a gingerbread man!”

Janet had found a recipe she liked. The girls mixed the dough and rolled it between two sheets of waxed paper. Then they cut it into shapes with the cookie cutters. Sandy made rabbits, and Janet made stars.

Betsy gathered up the scraps that were left from the rabbits and stars. She pounded them into a little ball and dipped it into the pie pan. Then she pinched and squeezed it.

Sandy and Janet laid their cookies on the cookie sheet. Sandy put it into the oven. Just before she closed the oven door, Betsy stuck her lump of dough on one corner of the cookie sheet.

“Nail polish remover—ick!” Janet whispered to Sandy. “Remind me not to eat *that* one.”

Betsy dusted her hands. She looked at the kitchen clock. “I’d better leave before your mother and father come home, Sandy.” She smiled. “I haven’t had so much fun in years. Good-bye.” The Witch walked to the front door. Janet and Sandy heard it close behind her.

Lisa was fast asleep in the high chair. She didn’t wake when Sandy picked her up and carried her upstairs. Janet kept watch over the cookies while Sandy put the baby into her crib.

When Sandy came back into the kitchen the cookies were nice and brown. Janet opened the oven door. With a pot-holder, Sandy pulled out the cookie sheet. She set it on the table to cool.

The girls leaned over the cookie sheet to admire their rabbits and stars, but all either of them saw was the cookie the Witch had made.

It looked like a button, and it seemed to be made of bone. And it was exactly like Witch Betsy!

As soon as it was cool, Sandy took the Witch's cookie upstairs. She put it on the dresser in Lisa's room, beside the snowsuit.

14

Sandy and Janet whispered together for hours after they went to bed. They slept late next morning.

Janet woke first. She sat up in bed and rubbed her eyes. The sunlight was streaming through the tall bay windows in Sandy's room.

Mrs. James looked into the room. "Good morning, Janet. Your mother telephoned, and I told her you were still asleep. She and your father have to go to a wedding today. I told her you could spend the day with Sandy."

Sandy was awake now. She jumped out of bed and gave her mother a hug. "That's great!" she said. She noticed that her mother was holding the snowsuit. "Did you sew on the button?"

Mrs. James held up the snowsuit. “Yes, doesn’t it look nice? Just imagine, the man who sold it to me rang the bell this morning. I thought he wanted the button back, but he only wanted to be sure I’d sewn it onto something. I showed him the snowsuit. He was so pleased that he insisted on giving me a basket of apples. Poor man, I’m sure there’s something wrong with him.”

Sandy pulled off her pajamas and started to dress. “Apples! Where are they, Mother?”

“In the kitchen. I was tempted to eat one, but I think I’ll make a pie and maybe some applesauce for the baby. You’ll see the apples when you get your breakfast. Make yourself some waffles. I have batter ready in a pitcher on the kitchen table. And the waffle iron is hot.” Mrs. James went down the hall to the baby’s room.

The girls dressed in a hurry and ran downstairs. The basket of apples was on the kitchen floor.

“What’s the matter, Sandy?” Janet asked. “Why are you so excited?” She picked up one of the apples and smelled it. “M-m-m.”

Sandy snatched the apple away from her and threw it back into the basket. “Are you out of your mind, Janet? Don’t you remember what these apples did to us? And my mother wants to feed them to the baby!”

Janet looked at her. “You mean,” she said, “they’re the Witch’s apples?”

“Of course,” Sandy said. “Don’t you recognize the basket? Help me, Janet.” Sandy took one side of the basket and Janet held the other. Together they managed to carry the heavy basket to the hall closet. Sandy shoved it behind the vacuum cleaner and threw her last year’s coat over it. “I’ll have to get it out of here later,” she whispered, “but this ought to do for now.”

Janet quietly closed the closet door. The girls went back to the kitchen to eat breakfast.

“Betsy’s right,” Janet said. “Silas is a nuisance.” She opened the waffle iron.

Sandy poured the batter into the iron. “We’d better go to see the Witch before he does anything else.”

The waffles were delicious. It seemed a shame to have to eat them in such a hurry, but neither Sandy nor Janet wanted to be around when Mrs. James started to look for the apples. They finished

breakfast and stacked their dishes in the dishwasher. Then they put on their jackets.

Sandy called upstairs, “It’s a lovely day, Mother. We’re going out.”

“Have fun,” Mrs. James said.

15

“I wonder what Silas will think when he sees Betsy,” Janet said. “Your mother showed him the cookie button sewn to the snowsuit.”

“Why didn’t he see Betsy when she went home last night?” Sandy wanted to know.

Sandy and Janet crossed Church Avenue and walked down the street toward the old house.

“Do you think we should knock on the front door or sneak in by the back window?” Janet asked.

“I don’t think anybody ever uses that front door,” Sandy said.

The girls crossed three more streets and headed down the long block where the Witch’s house stood.

“Sandy!” Janet gasped. “Look!”

Sandy couldn’t believe her eyes. There must have been a terrible fire last night. Where the old house had been was only a blackened ruin. The brick chimneys were still standing, but not much else was left of the house. A few charred boards were all that was left of the walls. The weeds had been trampled flat by the firemen. Broken panes of glass from the windows littered the ground. Still hanging from its hook was the great iron pot.

Sandy had an awful thought. “Betsy must have been asleep in the house.”

“I know,” Janet said in a low voice.

The two girls picked their way through the crushed weeds and piles of shattered glass. They stepped into what had once been the parlor. The mantelpiece had been smashed by a fireman's ax. There was a hole in the chimney. Sandy saw something gleaming inside.

She got down on her hands and knees and crawled into the fireplace. Reaching up, she grabbed hold of an object that was jammed up into the chimney and held in place by two spikes hammered into the bricks. Sandy tried jiggling it to get it loose, but it was wedged tight. Soot and ashes poured down on her.

Sandy coughed and backed out of the fireplace. "There's something hidden in the chimney, Janet. Can you reach it through the hole?"

"I'm not tall enough," Janet said. "Maybe if I stood on your back I could get it."

Sandy crouched down. "I'm filthy already," she said. "Go ahead." She braced herself.

Janet stepped on Sandy's back. She reached into the hole in the chimney. "Got it," she said. She lifted out the object and stepped down.

Sandy stood up and shook herself. “You weigh more than I thought.” She brushed her hair out of her eyes. “What did you fish out?”

“A little chest,” Janet said.

“It looks like gold.” Sandy rubbed the metal box.

“Brass,” Janet said. She shook the chest. It rattled.

Sandy looked around. “Let’s get away from here. Silas may be back at any time. We know *he* wasn’t in the house when it burned. My mother saw him this morning.”

Janet shoved the brass chest under her jacket. “We’ll go to my house. Mom and Dad won’t be back from that wedding for hours.”

On the way to Janet's house they kept looking for Silas, but they didn't see him anywhere. They walked as fast as they could. Neither of them felt like talking. Sandy was trying not to think about Betsy.

At last they came to the red brick apartment building. When Janet unlocked her front door, the two girls went right to the frilly pink bedroom. Janet took the little brass chest out from under her jacket and put it on the bed. Then she and Sandy sat down, one on each side of the chest, to look at it.

The chest was carved with a strange pattern of twisting, curling shapes. Sandy thought they were leaves, but they looked more like feathers to Janet. Although the brass was smooth and worn as if by long years of use, the hinges still seemed strong. There was a little keyhole, and the chest was locked.

Sandy tried to pry it open, but the lock held firm.

Janet went out of the room and came back with one of her mother's hairpins. She bent one end of the hairpin into a hook and pushed it into the keyhole. "Abracadabra," Janet said. "Open, Sesame!"

The lock clicked and sprang open. Janet lifted the lid of the little chest.

Inside were three buttons. One was black and shiny with a lot of little flat sides, like a diamond. The second was square. It glowed dark red and seemed to have a light far down inside it. The third

was flat and round, bigger than the other two. It was milky in color and gleamed like a pearl.

"They're the Witch's prize buttons!" Sandy whispered.

“No wonder Betsy liked to collect buttons,” Janet said. “Aren’t these beautiful?”

Sandy took the white button out of the chest and looked hard at it. She began to see things she hadn’t noticed at first. As she looked they became more and more clear. “Janet,” Sandy said, when she had been staring for some time at the button, “it’s like a little flying saucer.”

Now Janet took a good look. At first she too saw only a round flat pearly button. Then she saw port-holes, and a door.

Sandy held the button on her outstretched palm. Before she knew what was happening it rose into the air and circled the room. It came to rest again on Sandy’s hand.

“It *is* a flying saucer,” Janet said.

Sandy laid the pearly button on the bed and picked up the square red button. She looked deep into it. The little light seemed to flicker. “This one sure is spooky,” she said. “It must be magic too. I wonder what it’s good for.”

Janet was holding the black button. The shiny sides glittered and reflected colors from everything in the room. “It hardly seems to be black at all now,” Janet said. “Maybe all this one does is change color. It’s too bad the white button is only a toy. I wish we were the right size to fly in it.”

Suddenly all the world seemed to turn pink. Sandy didn’t know what was happening. Then she saw that she was sitting on top of a

high cliff. “Get back, Janet!” Sandy scrambled away from the edge. The ground under her was soft and spongy.

“Yipe!” Janet looked down. She crawled over to Sandy.

The girls huddled together on the strange pink earth. They looked around. Sandy pointed. “There’s the button spaceship. Only now it’s big enough for us to get into.”

“You mean,” Janet said, “now we’re small enough. Don’t you know we’re still on my bed? Only now we’re not much bigger than fleas.”

It was true. The room seemed enormous. The brass chest looked as large as a house.

Sandy still had the square button in her hand. “This changed size too,” she said, showing it to Janet.

Janet looked at the black button. “So did this one, maybe because we’re holding them. Our clothes changed too.”

“That’s lucky,” Sandy said. “I’m so small now I’d never be able to climb out of one of my shoes if it was its usual size.”

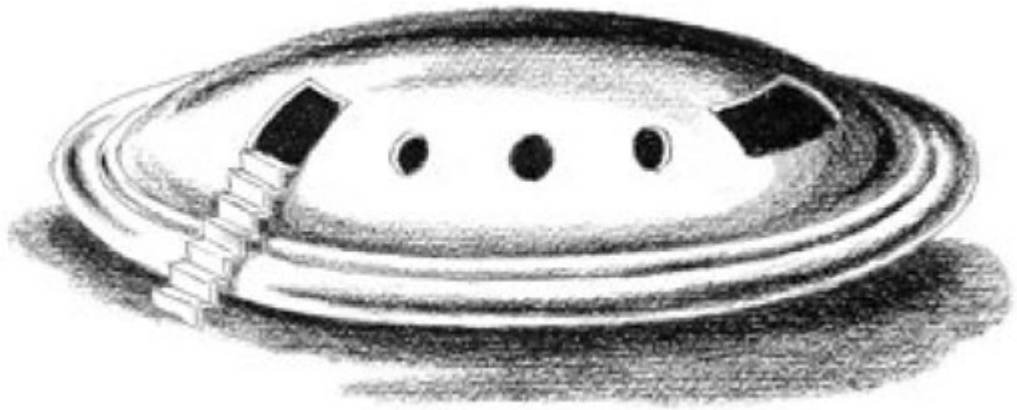
Janet stood up. Her feet sank into the soft bedspread. It was difficult to walk but she made her way over to the button spaceship. “There ought to be some way to get in,” she said. “I wish I knew what it was.”

No sooner had Janet said this than she did know. She tapped three times on the side of the white button. A door opened in the spaceship, and a ladder came down.

“Come on, Sandy.” Janet started to climb the steps.

Sandy put the red button into the pocket of her jeans. She struggled to her feet and walked across the bedspread to the white button spaceship. Then she followed Janet up the ladder and into the flying saucer.

17



When Sandy reached the top of the ladder she stepped into the spaceship. She turned around and lifted the ladder into the flying saucer. Each step folded as Sandy pulled it up. When she was done, the ladder was a neat stack just inside the door of the ship. Sandy closed the door.

Janet was looking out of a wide window. “This must be the windshield. There’s a stick here that looks as if it’s meant to steer the ship.”

Two seats were placed side by side with the stick coming up from the floor between them. Janet and Sandy sat down. Janet took hold of the stick and pulled it up. The flying saucer rose into the air. When she pushed the stick forward the ship flew forward. And when she took her hand off the stick, the ship stood still. Janet practiced flying all around the room.

“My mother loves fresh air.” Janet pointed to the window. It was open about two inches at the top. Janet steered the flying saucer through the window and out into the sunshine.

Sandy took a turn at the stick. It was easier to steer the spaceship than to ride a bicycle. At first the girls had a hard time telling what they were looking at. Everything was so big. Sandy tried flying very high. Then things began to look more like themselves.

“I’m beginning to know what the world is like to a mosquito,” Sandy said.

She decided to fly home and see what was happening there. Her mother was just coming down the front steps with the baby carriage. An enormous Lisa was wearing her new snowsuit. When Mrs. James had walked to the end of the block and turned the corner, Sandy flew down toward the steps. She leveled off and steered the flying saucer through the mail slot in the front door and into the hall.

Sandy’s father was sitting in the living room watching television. The New York Jets were playing the Green Bay Packers. Sandy knew that her father wouldn’t see or hear anything else until halftime.

Zooming over her father’s head, Sandy flew through the house to the kitchen. There was something on the kitchen table that looked like a note. The writing was so big that Sandy flew up to the ceiling and turned the flying saucer on edge so she and Janet could look through the windshield at the note.

Dear Sandy,
I’ve taken Lisa to the park. Get yourself and Janet some lunch.

Love,
Mother

Sandy straightened the flying saucer and brought it down to land on the tabletop. She opened the door and pushed out the ladder. It unfolded. The girls walked down the steps.

“I smell cinnamon,” Janet said.

Sandy saw a gigantic pan in the middle of the table. She ran over to it and looked up at the brown crust that hung over the edge of the pan far above her. “Apple pie,” she said. “My mother must have found the Witch’s apples.”

“Yes,” Janet said. She pointed to the basket on the floor. “At least nobody seems to have eaten any yet.”

“We’ll have to do something,” Sandy said. “But first let’s have lunch. I can’t think with an empty stomach.”

They were much too small to open the refrigerator, but one of the kitchen cabinet doors was open a crack. They climbed back into the flying saucer and flew into the cabinet.

All the cereal and cracker boxes were closed tight, and the lid was on the jar of peanut butter.

“There are nuts in a bowl on the table,” Sandy said.

Janet steered the flying saucer out of the cabinet and into the bowl. The girls again got out of the ship. They climbed across the nuts until they found an almond with a cracked shell. Sandy and Janet made their way through the crack. It was like walking into a dark cave and nibbling on a rock.

“Now I know why mosquitoes eat people,” Sandy said.

The girls picked their way out of the shell. Sandy looked across the wide table. On the other side of the pie she saw something yellow.

“Back into the spaceship, Janet,” Sandy said. She started to sing, “You must never put bananas in the refrigerator.”

18

Even tunneling through the skin of a banana was hard work for Janet and Sandy. They finally managed to tear a hole in one end. Now they could reach in and scoop out handfuls of the soft fruit. It was messy but they were hungry.

"I never ate so much banana in my life," said Janet after a while. "Now that I think of it, I never did like bananas very much."

"Don't complain, Janet." Sandy licked her fingers. "It's food. And anyway, you're my guest. You should be polite about what I serve you for lunch."

Janet wiped her hands on the smooth outside of the banana. “I’ve had enough,” she said.

Just then the doorbell rang.

The Jets were trying for a touchdown. Mr. James never heard the doorbell.

The girls climbed back into the spaceship and flew to the front door. Sandy’s father didn’t look up. He was too busy watching the television.

Sandy was driving. She flew low and looked out of the mail slot. “I don’t see anybody, Janet. They must have gone away.” She steered the button spaceship through the slot and out into the open air.

They were flying over the front stoop when the flying saucer gave a jerk and stopped still. Sandy pushed the stick forward, but the spaceship stayed where it was. Suddenly it rose up higher. Again it stopped.

“Something’s wrong, Janet,” Sandy said. “I can’t control it.”

“Here. Let me take over.” Janet grabbed the stick and shifted the flying saucer into reverse. It jiggled. Janet moved the stick back and forth. “It’s just stuck,” she said. Then the spaceship tipped on its side.

Sandy had a sudden, awful thought. “It’s as if an invisible giant was holding the white button,” she said. “Oh, Janet, do you suppose Silas could have kept one of the Witch’s apples and eaten it?”

Janet stopped trying to drive the flying saucer. “We know Silas wanted to get his hands on the buttons. Remember what a mess he made in the old house when he was looking for them. Now we really are in trouble.” Janet took the black button out of her pocket and rubbed it nervously.

Sandy bared her teeth like a tiger. “I feel more and more like a mosquito. If only I could see Silas I’d pick a tender spot and bite.”

Janet turned the black button over and over in her hand. “I wish we could see what’s holding us,” she said.

As soon as she said this the side port-holes of the flying saucer became dark. Something was covering them. Sandy ran to see what it was.

“Fingers,” she said. “I can see lines like a huge fingerprint.” Sandy came back to her seat beside Janet. She didn’t talk about biting anymore now that she’d seen the big fingers. She remembered what can happen to a mosquito.

Neither of the girls wanted to talk now.

All at once the flying saucer was lifted even higher. Sandy and Janet looked through the windshield at an enormous greeny-blue eye.

“Witch Betsy!” Sandy gasped.

“She’s alive,” Janet said. “And she wants her buttons back.”

Sandy pulled the square red button out of the pocket of her jeans. She looked at it. Deep inside the button the little light flickered. “This button is so small now that I don’t think Betsy could even see it,” Sandy said. “And she couldn’t hear our voices no matter how loud we screamed. Anyway she has the door of the spaceship jammed shut with her finger. What shall we do?”

Sandy heard a strange hollow voice. It seemed to come from far far down in the red button. “Use the Wishing Button, stupid,” the voice said.

Sandy grabbed Janet’s arm. “Did you hear that, Janet?” Sandy could hardly raise her voice to a whisper. “The red button talks!” she said. “It can answer questions.”

Janet nodded. “Sandy,” she said, “the red button is right. We are stupid.” She held up the black button. It glittered like a diamond, each side flashing a different color. “We should have known. This is the Wishing Button. Every time I wished for something it came true.” Janet closed her hand over the button. “Funny,” she said, “now that I know it’s a Wishing Button, I’m scared.”

“Don’t be scared, Janet,” Sandy said. “Just think hard and make a good wish.”

Janet closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against her fist. Then she took a deep breath, opened her eyes, and rubbed the black button. “I wish we were our right size and standing beside Witch Betsy on the doorstep.”

19

The Witch looked at Sandy and Janet. “I’m glad it was you who found the magic buttons,” she said. “I hope you didn’t get into trouble with them.” She put the flying saucer button into a little black handbag. “Please, could I have the other two. They’re not safe to play with.”

Sandy looked at the red button. She had only just found out how to use it. “If this one answers questions,” she said, “it would be handy to have in school.”

“A very good reason why you should give it back to me,” the Witch said. She held out her hand. Sandy gave her the button. Betsy

dropped it into her handbag.

"Please," Sandy begged, "could we use the Wishing Button before we give it back?"

Betsy looked shocked. "That's the most dangerous button of all! I have *never* used it."

"Then why do you keep it?" Janet asked.

"It's better for me to have it than somebody like Silas," Betsy said. "What do you want it for?"

"We have to do something about the apples Silas gave my mother," Sandy said. "My father always gets hungry at halftime when he's watching a football game. He's sure to take a piece of the apple pie Mother made."

"What's wrong with that?" the Witch wanted to know. "Surely your father has a right to eat pie if he wants to. By the way, how did the cookies turn out?"

"Mother sewed the cookie you made to Lisa's snowsuit," Sandy said.

Betsy nodded. "I thought she would."

Sandy lost her temper. "Betsy!" she screamed. "It would be dangerous for my father to be invisible."

The Witch stared at her. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"The apples," Janet explained.

Betsy took a long look at Sandy. "Unless you steal them," she said, "there is nothing wrong with those apples."

Sandy felt guilty. She didn't know what to say.

Janet felt she had to say something to change the subject. "Betsy, why don't you rebuild your house with the Wishing Button?"

"Too easy," the Witch said. "There's no fun in that. Anyway I was getting tired of the place."

Sandy was still worried about the apples. "Why were *you* invisible?" she asked the Witch.

"A trick of the trade." Betsy vanished right before their eyes. Then slowly she came back into view. "Now, if you'll let me have that button you're holding, Janet, I'll be on my way."

Janet gave Betsy the glittering black Wishing Button. “I still have your brass chest,” she said.

The Witch opened her bag and dropped the Wishing Button into it. “I don’t need the chest anymore. I’m planning to take a trip. The chest would be just one more thing to take along. You and Sandy can keep it. Oh, and don’t worry about Silas. He’s taken a job in the trimming store. He’d been among buttons so long, he found he wasn’t happy away from them.”

Betsy started to walk down the steps. Then she turned and came back. She opened her handbag and took out a glass button. “Here’s something to keep in the chest,” she said. “I found it this morning in an antiques store on Coney Island Avenue.” Betsy handed the button to Sandy.

The two girls looked at the glass button. It was soft gray in color and shaped like a round ball. And it seemed to be filled with smoke.

“What’s it good for?” Sandy asked.

Witch Betsy smiled. “I don’t know,” she said. “But I’m sure you and Janet will find a use for it.”

RUTH CHEW

WITCH'S CAT

with illustrations by the author

“Holly, look!” Matthew pointed to the shiny black cat perched on the high back of their grandfather’s chair.

The cat stretched all over. Now they could see that his whiskers and all four of his paws were snowy white. Slowly he closed one of his bright green eyes. Holly thought he was winking at her.

Holly and Matthew had come to stay with their grandparents, the Dorritys, in Brooklyn. Their mother and father were away for a few days.

Mrs. Dorrity came down from upstairs.

“What’s the cat’s name, Granny?” Holly asked.

Mrs. Dorrity laughed. “Your grandfather calls him Albert.”

“Why, Grandpa?” Matthew wanted to know.

“Because,” Mr. Dorrity said, “he’s the smartest cat I ever saw. I named him after Albert Einstein, the smartest scientist I ever heard of.”

“I put your things in the back bedroom, Matthew,” his grandmother told him. “Holly can have the middle room. You’d better go up and unpack. I’ll get supper ready.” She went to the kitchen.

Holly started upstairs. The black cat streaked past her and raced to the floor above. The children followed, but by the time they reached the top of the stairs, the cat was out of sight.

They were in a narrow hall.

“Let’s explore.” Matthew started to walk toward the front of the old house.

“Matt,” Holly reminded him, “didn’t Granny tell us to unpack?”

The two of them went into a room halfway down the hall.

The suitcase with Holly’s clothes was on the bed. Matthew was two years older than his sister. He helped her unpack. Then they both went to the back bedroom. The door was open. Holly peeked in. She grabbed her brother’s arm and put her finger to her lips.

Matthew stared. There was a big bookcase in the room. Three books were open on the floor. The black cat was lying on his stomach. With one white paw he held the largest book in place. With another he was turning the pages.

2

Creak! Matthew stepped on a squeaky board in the old floor.

Albert jumped to his feet and began shoving the books around. The cat leaped into the air. Then he began to chase his tail as if he were a kitten.

Holly picked up the books and went to put them back into the bookcase.

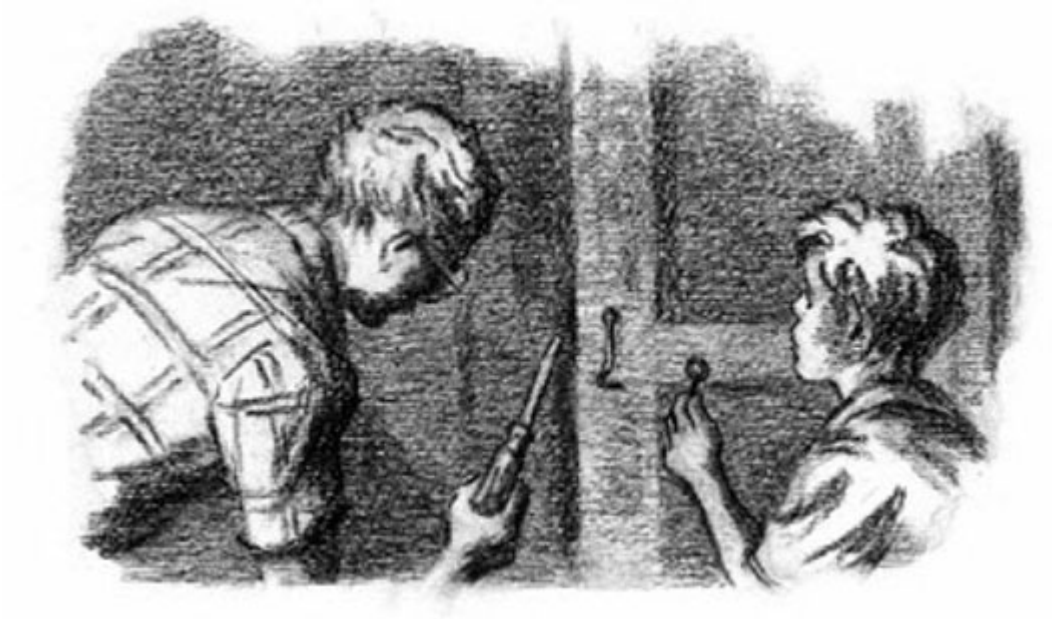
Albert stopped chasing his tail and walked over to her. He began to purr. Suddenly he bumped his head against her leg.

Holly was so startled that she dropped the biggest book.

Matthew rushed to grab it, but he slipped on a little rug and slid across the bare floor. He held on to the end of the bed to keep from crashing into the radiator. Two wooden slats fell from the bed frame.

Moments later Mrs. Dorrity came into the room. “What are you children doing? I thought the kitchen ceiling was going to fall on my head!”

Now Mr. Dorrity, out of breath and holding on to the cat with both hands, came puffing in. “Guess who I caught sneaking down the hall?” He looked at the book on the floor. “Albert thinks books are something to play with. We’ll have to put a hook on this door to keep him out.” He took the cat downstairs.



Mrs. Dorrity went back to the kitchen.

Holly helped her brother unpack.

Matthew kept whistling under his breath.

When Mr. Dorrity came back with tools, Matthew stopped whistling and helped his grandfather put a hook and eye on each side of the door at the right height for Matthew and Holly to reach them.

Holly went to set the table. Supper was ready when her brother and her grandfather came downstairs.

Between bites of roast chicken, Holly asked, “How long have you had Albert, Grandpa?”

“Just since last Tuesday,” Mr. Dorrity said. “We found him sleeping in your grandmother’s herb garden.”

“He’s a nice cat, really,” Mrs. Dorrity said.

“We just have to keep him out of our books,” her husband reminded her.

“Maybe he wants to read them,” Matthew said.

This was exactly what Holly had been thinking. But when her grandfather burst out laughing, she was glad she hadn’t said it.

After supper they all went out into the little backyard. The cat came out after them.

A swing dangled from an enormous pear tree. The cat made a flying leap and landed on the swing seat. He sat there swaying gently back and forth.

Mr. Dorrity rubbed his chin. “Albert really ought to be in a circus.”

“Maybe he ran away from one,” Mrs. Dorrity said.

The pear tree shaded most of the garden. Holly saw a lot of plants like the ones in her backyard at home. “I thought this was an herb garden, Granny.”

“Herbs need sun.” Mrs. Dorrity pointed to the corner of the garden farthest from the pear tree. “My herb garden is over there.”

Holly and Matthew followed their grandmother over to the patch of sunny ground. It was crowded with all sorts of plants. Some of them had feathery leaves, and others had shiny ones. One even had curly purple leaves.

Mrs. Dorrity showed the children some spiky blue flowers. “I make one kind of tea from the leaves of these and a different tea from the little white daisies over there.”

Matthew bent over a plant with bright blue flowers and hairy leaves. “What do you use these flowers for, Gran?”

“I make them into candy,” Mrs. Dorrity told him. “And the leaves are good for lemonade!”

Mr. Dorrity joined them. “I always thought herbs were just those dried things in little jars.” He held a green leaf under Holly’s nose. “Smells like chewing gum, doesn’t it?” He picked another leaf. “And this is probably what brought Albert to the garden.”

“Catnip?” Matthew asked.

“You guessed it,” his grandfather said. “He was fast asleep when I first saw him. He must have been drunk on catnip.”

Holly turned to look at Albert, who had stopped swinging but was still sitting on the swing. She could see that the cat’s ears were flat against his head. He seemed to know that Mr. Dorrity was talking about him.

Silently the cat jumped down from the swing and trotted to the kitchen door. It was closed but not clicked shut. With one white paw

Albert pulled the door open and slipped into the house.

The swing jiggled for a little while after the cat jumped off. Matthew walked over to it. “Where’s Albert?”

“He went into the house,” Holly said. “He didn’t like Grandpa saying he got drunk on catnip.”

Mr. Dorrity laughed. “You mean I hurt his feelings? I’ll have to be more careful after this.”

Mrs. Dorrity opened the back door. “Come indoors, children. It’s getting late.”

She held the door open until everyone was inside.

Mr. Dorrity looked around the kitchen. “I wonder where that cat is. At least we know he’s not playing with the books in the back bedroom.” He yawned. “Well, I’m off to bed. Anybody have a hug for me?”

Holly and Matthew both went to hug their grandfather.

Mrs. Dorrity kissed them goodnight. “Sleep well,” she said.

The children went upstairs. They kept looking for the cat, but they didn’t see him anywhere. The old house was spooky at night. A little light came from a night-light in the bathroom.

Matthew snapped on the light in Holly’s room halfway down the hall. He walked into the room and looked around. “No cat here.”

“There are no books in here either,” Holly said. “Maybe I can find something to read in your room.”

They went around the bend in the hall to Matthew’s room.

The door was closed, but there was a dim light showing under it.

For a moment the two children stood quite still. Then Holly took a deep breath and pushed the door open.

Albert was lying on the floor with a book open in front of him. A little square flashlight was set on its side to shine on the page of the book as the cat turned the pages.

“That’s my flashlight! He’s wearing out the battery.” Matthew switched it off and put it into his pocket.

Holly turned on the ceiling light and bent down to pick up the heavy book.

The cat put both front paws on the open pages. “Don’t lose my place.”

Holly and Matthew stared at the cat. Then Matthew picked up an envelope from the desk. “Will this do for a bookmark?”

Holly put the envelope in the book to mark the cat’s place. She put the book on the bottom shelf of the big bookcase. “Just be careful with the books, Albert. Grandpa thinks you’re playing with them.”

“It’s not easy for me to take them out and put them back,” the cat said. “Maybe you two could help me.”

“Must you read the books?” Matthew asked. “Grandpa and I went to a lot of trouble to keep you from getting into them. How did you get in here, anyway?”

Albert stood up and stretched. “If you hook the door, I’ll show you.”

Matthew shut the door and hooked it on the inside.

“Out of my way!” the cat ordered.

Both children moved away from the door.

Albert measured the distance with his eyes. Then he jumped up and knocked the hook out of the eye. He landed on the floor with a thump.

In almost no time Mrs. Dorrity came pattering down the hall and tapped on the door. “What’s going on in there? I heard a bang. I thought you children were going to bed. Does your mother let you stay up so late?”

The cat ran under the bed.

Holly opened the door. “It’s my fault, Granny. I wanted a book to read.”

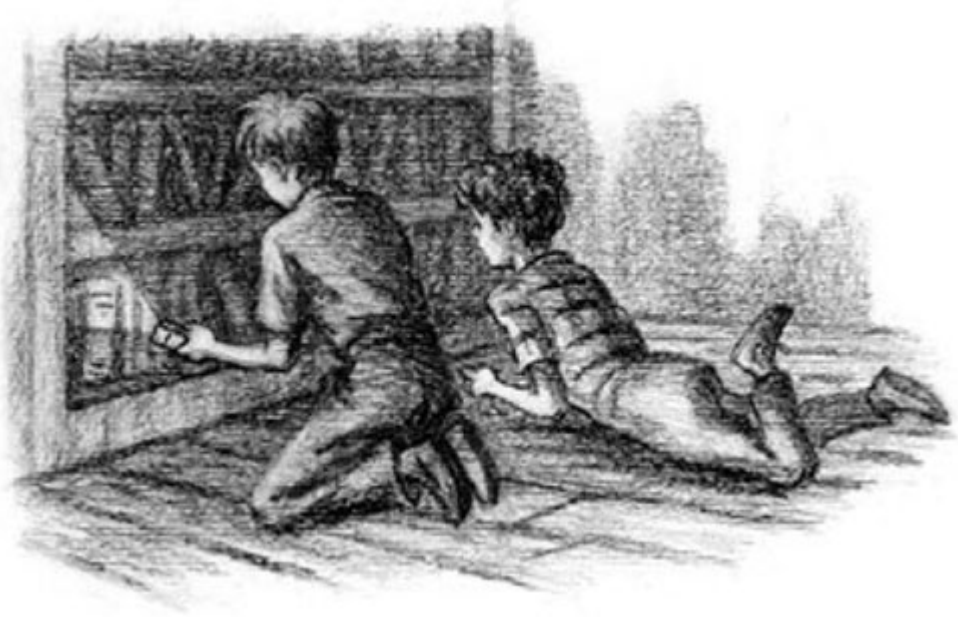
Mrs. Dorrity went to the bookcase. “Here’s one I always loved.” She pulled out a battered book with a red cloth binding, and handed it to Holly. “Don’t stay up too late with it. By the way, has either of you seen that cat? I want to give him his supper.”

Before either of the children could answer, Albert tiptoed out from his hiding place and went to rub against Mrs. Dorrity’s leg. She picked him up and held him against her cheek. “Silly cat,” she said. “We all know you weren’t drunk on catnip. You’re much too smart for that.” She took him downstairs to the kitchen with her.

Matthew took out his flashlight and got down on his hands and knees in front of the bookcase to look at the title of the big book Albert had been reading. “Holly,” he whispered, “take a look at this!”

Holly had already started the book her grandmother had given her. Now she lay on her stomach to look at the name of the book the cat found so interesting. “*Magic from the Common Garden Herb*,” she read.

“We’d better watch that cat,” Matthew said.



Holly went to her own room to read before taking her shower. She sat on her bed, but before she could open the book, her brother came into the room. “What’s the matter, Matt?”

“Holly, was that cat really talking? Or am I nuts?” Matthew asked.

“He was talking,” Holly said. “You know Grandpa said he was the smartest cat he ever saw.”

“Grandpa laughed when I said Albert wanted to read,” Matthew reminded her.

“Maybe Albert doesn’t just want to,” Holly said. “I think he does read.”

“Then why doesn’t he tell Gramps he won’t hurt the books?” Matthew asked.

Holly thought about this. “Grandpa doesn’t believe in magic. He might have a heart attack if Albert spoke to him. Even you thought you were crazy. Albert is a nice cat. He likes Grandpa and doesn’t want to hurt him.”

“I hope you’re right,” Matthew said.

At this moment Mrs. Dorrity walked in and saw that Holly was holding the book. “I shouldn’t have given that to you tonight, dear,” she said. “You’ll never get to bed. I’ll keep it for you till tomorrow.” She took the book. “You don’t have time to take a bath. Maybe you two should take showers instead.” She left the room.

Matthew went to his room to get undressed. He rushed to the bathroom before Holly could get there first.

When at last Holly was in bed, she had a hard time getting to sleep. Finally she got up and tiptoed over to the tall bay windows at one end of the room.

The center window was open. Holly peeked through the venetian blind and looked down into the backyard. A yellow moon was rising over the big pear tree.

Holly saw something moving around in the corner of the garden where her grandmother grew her herbs. It seemed to be an animal. Maybe it was a rat!

When her eyes became used to the moonlight, she saw that it was a black cat with white paws. He was nibbling at the plants.

Grandpa was right after all! Holly said to herself. Albert was crazy about catnip.

The cat backed out of the patch of plants and trotted to the kitchen door.

Holly went back to bed. In a few minutes she was fast asleep.

7

The early morning sunlight streaming through the cracks in the venetian blind woke Holly. She jumped out of bed and pulled the blind all the way up. Now a gentle breeze came in her open window. Holly went to the bathroom to wash her face and brush her teeth.

She came back to get dressed. As she leaned over to roll up the legs of her jeans and tie her shoelaces, a furry head bumped against her leg.

"Good morning, Albert," Holly said.

The cat purred. Holly scooped him up and held him against her cheek. She waited for him to say something, but Albert just went on purring.

Holly wondered if she had dreamed that the cat was talking last night.

Then she heard a purry whisper. “Wake your brother! He has his door hooked. I want to get in there.”

Holly remembered that Matthew was worried about what the cat was up to. She held on to Albert and took him down the hall toward her brother’s room.

Before she reached the door, Matthew opened it. He was wearing a bathrobe and slippers. When he stepped into the hall, he skidded on something and almost fell.

“For goodness’ sake, be careful!” the cat said. “Look what you’ve done to my samples!”

Albert wriggled out of Holly’s grasp and landed softly on all four of his white paws. With his mouth, the cat began to pick up tiny sprigs of herbs that were laid in neat piles on the shiny wood floor.

Albert carried one of the piles into Matthew's room. He put it near a wall. Then he went to get another pile. "Do you think you two could pick up these things without bruising them?" he asked.

"Of course." Matthew took four sheets of notepaper from the desk and gave two to Holly. They each used one sheet of paper to push a pile of leaves onto another sheet. Soon all the piles were lined up along a wall in Matthew's bedroom. He went to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

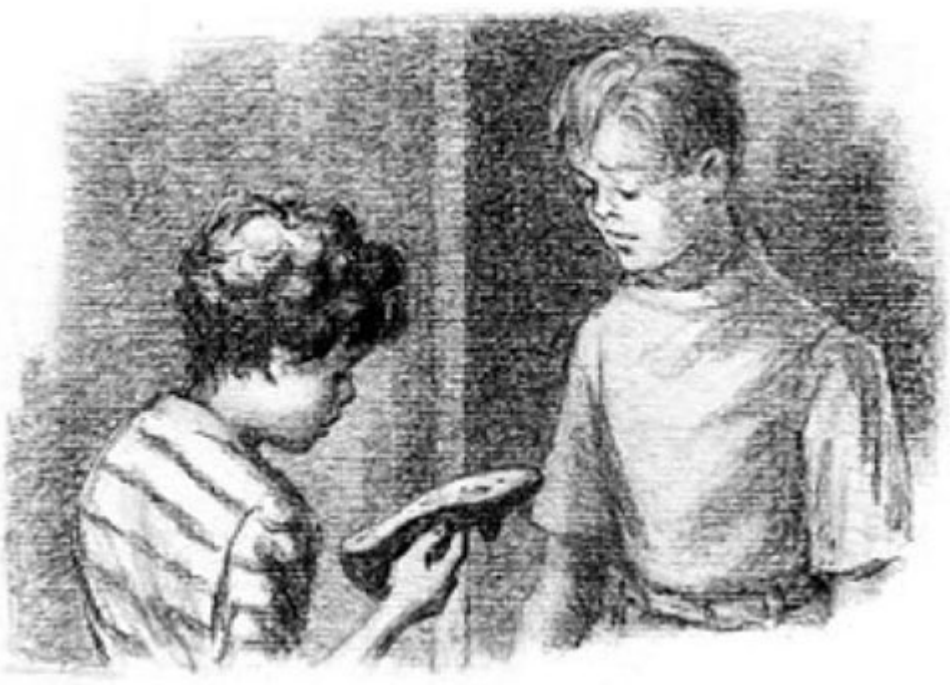
Albert trotted over to the bookcase. He put his paw on the book he was looking at the night before. "How about getting this out for me, Holly?"

Holly pulled the book out of the bookcase and put it open on the floor near the piles of leaves.

The cat turned the pages of the book until he came to one with pictures of plants. He began to compare his herbs with the pictures in the book.

“Holly, come here!” Matthew stood barefoot in the doorway of his room. The cat was busy trying to match his herb samples with the pictures in the book.

Holly walked over to her brother. He handed her one of his red corduroy slippers. “Take a look at the bottom of this.”



Holly saw that the sole of the slipper was smeared with some sort of green slime.

“I can’t get this gunk off,” Matthew said. “I have to get dressed now.”

“Give me the slippers. I’ll see what I can do.” Holly took the slippers to her room.

She heard her grandfather calling, “Matthew! Holly! Breakfast time!”

Holly pulled open the top drawer of the dresser, stuffed the red slippers into it, and closed the drawer tight.

Something smelled delicious. Holly went downstairs to the kitchen.

“Where’s Matthew?” Mrs. Dorrity asked. “Your grandfather is making waffles.”

“Matt isn’t dressed yet,” Holly said.

Mr. Dorrity put a waffle on her plate and poured batter into the waffle iron. “Don’t let this burn,” he said to his wife. “I’m going to get that boy. You have to eat waffles when they’re hot.” He rushed out of the room.

Mrs. Dorrity smiled. “Your grandfather gets very excited when he cooks anything.”

As soon as the waffle was ready, Mrs. Dorrity took it out of the waffle iron and put it into the oven.

Mr. Dorrity came downstairs with the cat under one arm and the book under the other. Matthew followed him into the kitchen. His grandmother gave him the waffle she was keeping warm.

“Good thing I went upstairs,” Mr. Dorrity said. “Albert was into the books again. This is a very interesting old cookbook. I bought it at a garage sale. I’m sure I’ll never find another copy. I’ll just have to lock it up. Albert must be after a recipe for catnip tea.”

Mr. Dorrity laughed and put the cat on the floor. He took the book into the dining room and locked it in a cabinet. Then he came back into the kitchen. “Anybody ready for another waffle?”

Both Matthew and Holly were hungry for more. Their grandfather poured batter into the waffle iron.

Holly felt sorry for Albert. He was sitting quite still, and his white whiskers drooped.

Mrs. Dorrity leaned over to scratch the cat behind the ears. Then she filled his bowl with leftover roast chicken and put it down beside him.

After he finished his breakfast Albert went upstairs. Holly and Matthew followed him. The black cat went all the way down the hall to Matthew's room.

Mr. Dorrity had hooked the door.

Albert leaped up and knocked the hook out of the eye with one forepaw. At the same time he used both hind legs to kick the door open. The cat sailed into the room and landed in front of the little piles of herbs.

“Grandpa’s right,” Holly said. “You really do belong in the circus.”

“You’re terrific, Albert!” Matthew told him.

Albert’s whiskers perked up. “I’ve had practice.” He checked all the little piles. “I ought to keep them separate. I still don’t know if I have the herbs I need.”

Matthew shut the door. He took some envelopes off the desk. “You could put a different herb in each envelope and write the names on them.”

“I’ve learned to read,” the cat said, “but I haven’t figured out how to write yet.”

“You can tell us what to write and we’ll do it for you,” Holly told him.

Matthew and Holly set to work and wrote names like Chervil and Tansy on the envelopes. Albert inspected each pile of leaves, looking carefully and sniffing even more carefully. Then he showed them which herb to put into each envelope.

“Don’t let them get mixed with each other,” the cat warned them.

“What are you going to do with the herbs?” Holly asked.

The tip of Albert’s tail twitched. “I’ve seen herbs boiled and burned and scattered to make different kinds of magic. It’s what herbs you use together and how you blend them and the words you speak that make the difference. But I never learned the secret. I was going to find out from your grandfather’s book.”

“Grandpa said it was a cookbook.” Matthew picked up the envelopes and put them on the desk. “They’re here whenever you want them, Albert.”

The cat’s whiskers drooped. “Maybe that’s why the book said ‘Use to flavor soups and fish.’ Why would anybody want to flavor fish?”

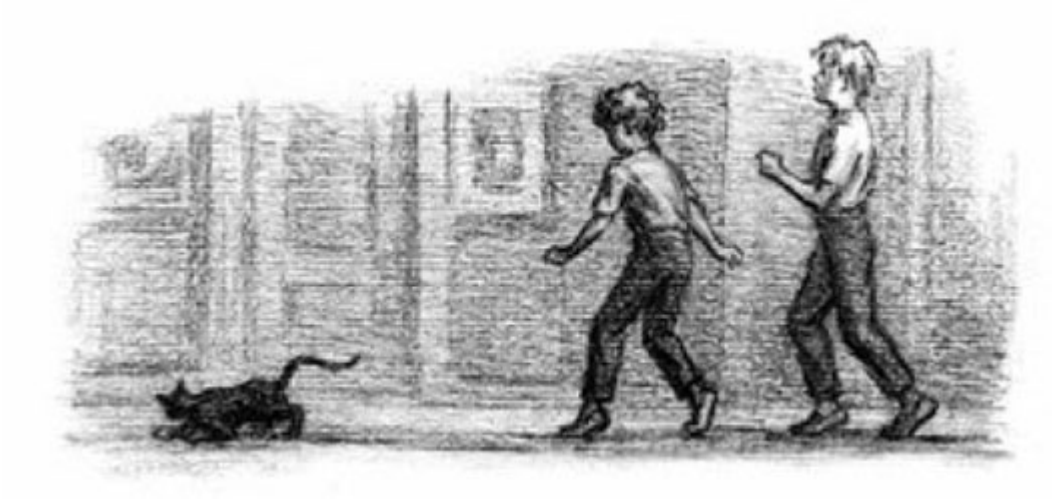
Holly opened the door and stepped into the hall. “I’m going to ask Granny for her book.” She looked at the cat. “Albert, what’s the matter with you?”

The cat’s green eyes gleamed and his white whiskers bristled. All his shiny black fur was standing on end. He sniffed the air. “I thought I smelled something I never smelled in this house before,

but it was very faint, and I couldn't be sure. It's getting stronger and stronger."

The cat sniffed the floor. Still sniffing, he crept silently out the door and down the hall.

Holly and Matthew tiptoed after him.



Albert went into Holly's room and started sniffing everywhere.

Matthew and Holly watched him from the doorway. The cat stopped in front of the dresser and stood on his hind legs to sniff each drawer. He jumped onto the dresser and leaned over to sniff at the one on the top.

Albert turned to look at the children. His green eyes seemed enormous. "Magic!" he said softly. "Powerful magic! What is in there?"

"Matt's bedroom slippers." Holly went over to the drawer and pulled out the two red corduroy slippers.

At once one slipper began to get bigger. Holly dropped the other one so she could hold on to the growing one with both hands. It kept getting bigger. She put the slipper on her foot over her shoe, and stood on it to keep it down. But the slipper went on growing.

Soon it was big enough for Holly to put her other foot in the slipper too. Then it was big enough to sit down in.

“Move over, Holly. After all, it’s my slipper.” Matthew stepped in and sat down beside his sister.

The cat had been watching from the top of the dresser. Now he jumped down and landed in Holly’s lap. “Stop growing, Slipper!” he commanded. “You’re quite big enough now.”

The slipper stopped growing.

“When you’re dealing with magic,” Albert explained, “it’s important to make sure the enchanted object knows who is Master of the Magic.”

“What makes you Master of the Magic?” Holly wanted to know.

“I gathered the herbs that are smeared together on the bottom of this slipper,” Albert explained. “They produced a certain mixture Nell Fisher always found very handy.”

“Who is Nell Fisher?” Holly asked.

“A good friend of mine,” the cat said. “She never would tell me the secret of her magic, but by accident your brother stumbled onto it.”

“Then why isn’t Matt the Master of the Magic?” Holly asked.

“He didn’t gather the herbs,” Albert said. “If I knew which herbs are crushed together, maybe I could make more of the mixture, but I’d have to know just what time of day it was, the phase of the moon, how much of each herb was used, how much pressure was applied, and what the magic words were.”

The cat thought for a moment. “We’ll have to make do with the mixture we have here,” he told the children. “There’s no time to lose! Nell Fisher is in trouble, and we have to help her.”

11

“What are we waiting for?” Matthew said. “Let’s go, Albert!”

The cat sat up straight in Holly’s lap. “Slipper,” he said, “we have to travel back in time to find Nell Fisher. Can you do this?”

For almost a full minute the slipper did not move.

“What’s the matter?” Holly asked.

“Time travel is a special skill,” Albert told her, “and the slipper is new to magic.”

The slipper gave a little jiggle.

Holly stroked the soft red corduroy. “You’re so bright,” she whispered. “I’m sure you can learn.”

Very slowly the slipper floated up into the air and headed for the open window. Holly was sure the window was too small for them to

go through, but it became bigger and bigger. The windowsill was as wide as a highway by the time they sailed over it into the open air.

Everything outdoors was enormous too.

“Matt,” Holly said. “How did everything become so big so fast?”

“I think we became small,” her brother told her.

“That’s clever of the slipper,” the cat said. “We’re so small nobody notices us.”

The slipper was rising straight up now. It travelled so fast that, before they knew it, they could hardly see the streets and houses down below.

Very soon the daylight turned to darkest night. The Earth they had left became smaller and smaller until it was just a blue ball whirling through space. Then it was so small that it looked like a star. The two children lost sight of it among the many bigger stars that they rushed past.

For a while they seemed to be lost in a crowd of stars, all different sizes and colors, and all going different ways.

Then, far, far off, a small blue star came in sight. Matthew grabbed his sister’s arm. “Holly! We must have gone in a circle. That looks like our Earth!”

The sky was getting lighter. It seemed to be very early in the morning. They sank down and down. At last the slipper landed gently on the water of a narrow winding river.

Holly patted the side of the slipper. She was surprised that it felt hard, not like corduroy at all!

The two children and the cat looked around. They were sitting on the seat of a strange wooden boat with both ends curving up into high points. Around them dragonflies darted over the water.

There was a hole in each side of the boat with an oar poking through it. Matthew grabbed one oar, and Holly took hold of the other.

“Watch how you handle those!” Albert jumped to the front of the boat. “I don’t want to be splashed.”

12

Boats are always rowed backward. Matthew and Holly had to keep turning their heads to see where they were going. Albert sat in the front of the boat and told them what was up ahead.

"Watch out!" the cat said. "We're coming to a big rock in the water."

They steered around the rock and rowed between tall green reeds.

A cool breeze blew around them. A bird chirped. The sun came up from behind a long row of rocky hills.

"Look, Matt!" Holly pointed to a mother sheep with a little lamb. They were nibbling wild grass in a field on one side of the river.

On the other side was a deep wood. "That looks like a good place to camp," Matthew said.

They rowed around a bend in the river. A grove of willows grew at the edge of the water. Before they reached the trees, a harsh voice said, "Drat! You've scared the fish!"

Matthew and Holly stopped rowing, but the boat drifted closer to the trees.

Someone was sitting on a branch that hung over the water, fishing with a long pole. At first the children couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman.

Albert became very excited. "Nell Fisher! What are you doing here?"

"Fishing. What else would I be doing?"

Now Holly and Matthew saw that it was a tall bony woman with big hands and feet. She had scraggly gray hair, dark piercing eyes, a long pointed nose, a sharp chin, and a thin crooked mouth.

The woman edged her way along the branch until she could slide off onto the ground. She stood up. Her clothes were torn and dirty. She waded into the water, lifted the cat out of the boat, and held him against her bony neck. "I never thought I'd see you again, Cat. Those clods told me they were going to drown you. They tried to drown me too, but I found an underwater tunnel and escaped." She stroked Albert. "You seem unharmed. Maybe that brew I rubbed on your nose helped."

“It smelled terrible,” Albert told her. “I could hardly breathe. And when those people held me under the water, I sank. I woke up later in a bed of herbs. I want you to meet Holly and Matthew. It was their grandmother who grew the herbs. They travelled with me from a place unknown to people here.”

Still holding the cat, Nell Fisher curtsied to Holly and Matthew. They took off their shoes, rolled up the legs of their jeans, and climbed out of the boat. Then they dragged it ashore.

“Albert told us you’re in trouble,” Holly said. “We want to help you.”

“Who’s Albert?” Nell Fisher asked. “Oh, you mean Cat?”

“Our grandpa says he’s the cleverest cat he ever saw, so he named him after a clever man,” Matthew told her.

Nell Fisher’s crooked mouth cracked into a grin. “He’s a nice cat,” she said. “But I always thought he was stupid.”

Albert bumped his furry head against her bony shoulder and purred.

13

Nell Fisher pulled a string of small fish out of the river. “It’s lucky I caught these before you folk came splashing along. Who’s ready for breakfast?”

The waffles seemed to have been eaten long ago. Everybody was hungry.

Nell Fisher took Matthew, Holly, and Albert into the woods and showed them her campground. There was a small fire burning in a hollow in the ground.

Nell cooked the fish whole by pushing sticks through them and laying them across the hollow where the fire burned. She kept turning the sticks as the fish cooked.

“What happened to your pots and pans, Nell?” the cat asked.

“I don’t know,” Nell Fisher told him. “After my neighbors took you away, they set fire to my cottage and destroyed everything in my herb garden. They roped bags of stones around my waist and tied my hands and feet. Then they threw me into the river.”

“Why did they do that?” Matthew asked.

“It was really all my fault,” Albert told him. “Nell let me live with her and even talked to me. Around here people who keep cats are thought to be witches. After a while, whenever anybody fell into a ditch and hurt his leg or if a cow stopped giving milk, people thought Nell had worked an evil spell.”

“Isn’t there a law here against killing someone just because you think she’s a witch?” Matthew asked.

“Of course,” Albert said. “This was a trial to see if Nell really was a witch. It’s called Trial by Water. They tie up the suspect and throw her into deep water. If she sinks, she’s innocent, because a witch would have magic to save herself from the water. If she doesn’t sink, she’s guilty. As punishment she is either hanged or burned.”

“As long as none of these people see me,” Nell Fisher said, “they believe I’m innocent, but if they see me alive and well, I’m in trouble.”

The fish were brown and crisp now. Holly picked some big green leaves to use as plates.

“Why does everything taste so good when you eat it with your fingers?” Matthew said.

“Maybe because there are no dishes to wash afterward,” Holly told him.

After breakfast Nell Fisher led the children to a blackberry patch growing in a sunny little glade. “Watch out for the thorns,” she warned them. “I don’t have any herbs to put on scratches. And eat what you pick. They taste best right off the bush.”

“That’s what I try to tell Mom,” Matthew said. “Blackberries get squishy when you try to keep them.”

“I want to talk to Cat. Come back to the campground when you’ve had enough berries.” Nell Fisher left the glade.

14

After they'd eaten their fill of blackberries, Holly and Matthew started to follow a little path back to Nell Fisher's campground. They came to a place where the path became two paths.

"Too bad we didn't notice this on the way here," Matthew said. "The paths look so much alike that I don't know which one we should take."

"We can take either," Holly told him. "If we find it's the wrong one, we'll come back and take the other."

They started along the path to the right. When they had been walking for some time and had not come to Nell Fisher's

campground, Matthew said, “We’d better go back and take the other path.”

Holly put her finger to her lips. “Listen!”

They heard a crashing sound coming toward them. Matthew pulled his sister off the path and into the underbrush. They lay on their stomachs and peeked through the tangled leaves.

A reddish-brown deer with spreading antlers came bounding along the path. He was followed by a pack of hounds barking in deep, long tones.

Close behind the hounds galloped a group of horseback riders.

Suddenly the deer left the path and leaped away in a circle, going through the woods in the opposite direction from the dogs and the people. In their hurry to turn, the dogs and the horses banged into each other. One rider fell off.

He wore plain brown clothes and seemed to be a servant. He jumped to his feet and grabbed his horse’s reins. “If you ask me, Nell Fisher is up to her tricks again.”

A tall man in a beautiful red and gold jacket said, “How is that, Tom? I thought they found she wasn’t a witch, so she’s not to blame for all our troubles.”

Tom pulled a lock of his hair. This made his head duck. “Beg pardon, my lord, but Nell’s body was not found. She could be anywhere around here.”

“If she is,” the lord said, “we’ll find her and take the proper steps. The hounds are baying again. Maybe they’ve picked up the scent.” He galloped after the dogs. The rest of the hunting party followed him.

Holly and Matthew crawled out from under the bushes and raced back to the fork in the path. They took the path that led to Nell Fisher’s campground.

Nell was waiting for them. “Hurry up! Cat has promised to take me for a boat ride.”

15

The boat was right where they had left it on the bank near the willow trees. Nell Fisher helped Matthew and Holly push it into the water.

The cat jumped into the front of the boat. Nell Fisher took her place on the seat. Matthew and Holly sat one on each side of her and picked up the oars.

"Nell," Matthew said. "You'd better get down low in the boat, so no one can see you."

"I've a better idea," Albert said. "Nell could change herself into a frog."

"You forget I don't have any of my magic mixtures," Nell Fisher reminded him.

Holly patted the side of the boat. "Maybe Slipper can help."

The boat quivered as if a little breeze had come up. A sweet voice said, "What's the matter with my hands?" Matt and Holly looked to see who had spoken.

A beautiful young woman was seated between the children. She had light brown hair that shone like gold in the sunlight and dark blue eyes with long lashes. Her hair was in two thick braids that reached to her waist, and her long blue gown was embroidered with daisies.

The woman was looking at her small white hands. "Very pretty," she said. "I hope they're as strong as usual."

"I don't think anyone will know you now, Nell," the cat said.

Nell Fisher raised one foot in the air. She looked at the soft pointed shoe that was tied to her foot with leather thongs. “I’m not used to these things.”

A branch of a willow tree hung over the boat. Nell Fisher stood up, grabbed hold of the branch, and swung herself up to sit on it. She stood up and held on to the branch above. “This gown is a nuisance.” She tucked the hem of it into her belt. Now her dress was not so long and she could walk along the branch without holding on.

Holly was afraid she'd fall into the water, but Nell turned and came back. She slipped down to the lower branch, and from there dropped into her place between Matthew and Holly in the boat.

"I never knew you to be such a showoff, Nell," Albert said.

"I was just testing to see how I could move in these fancy clothes," she told him.

Holly looked down into the water beside the boat. She could see the leaves overhead and the blue sky and even her own face in the still water under the willow tree. "Trade places with me, Nell," she said. "And take a look at what's in the water here."

Holly moved to the middle of the boat. Nell Fisher looked down into the still water at the side. For a minute she didn't say anything. Then she whispered, "Who's that?"

"That's you, Nell," the cat told her. "Who did you think it was?"

Holly and Matthew were both astonished to see Nell Fisher blinking tears from her eyes. "What's the matter?" Matthew asked.

"It's just," she said, "that I always wanted to look exactly like that."

Before any of them knew what was happening, a pack of dogs burst out of the forest, followed by a group of riders on horseback. Albert slid down into the boat and hid under the skirt of Nell Fisher's gown.

"Row, Holly!" Matthew whispered.

The two children started to row out into the middle of the river.

"Stop!" a voice commanded. "In the name of the lord of these lands." It was the voice of the groom who had fallen off his horse in the woods.

"Do as he says," Nell Fisher advised. "There are men with longbows ready to shoot their arrows at us."

The children stopped rowing.

The tall man in the red and gold jacket rode his horse into the water. When the man saw Nell Fisher, he took off his red velvet cap and bowed low over his horse's neck. "I am Robert, Earl of Garrick," he said. "Who are you, fair lady, and how do you come here?"

“My name is Eleanor of Fiswell,” Nell told him. “My friends and I have travelled far and heard of your noble deeds. I pray you to allow us to continue our journey.”

The earl stared at Nell Fisher. “I cannot permit you to continue alone and defenseless,” the earl said. “You must come to my castle where you will be safe.”

“My lord,” Nell Fisher said. “These children are in my care. I must not leave them.”

“If there were room for them on my horse, I’d take them with me.” The earl leaned over and pulled Nell out of the boat. He placed her in front of him on the big horse. “As you see, there’s only just enough room for you here.” He smiled. “But your friends will be most welcome at Castle Garrick. It’s five miles down the river.” He pointed in the direction from which they had rowed earlier in the day. Then he put spurs to his horse and rode back to the riverbank.

17

When the earl was back on shore again, he took a little curved hunting horn from his belt and blew two sharp blasts. Nell Fisher sat on his horse in front of him. She held her head high and seemed to be enjoying herself.

At the sound of the horn, the people on horseback lined up behind the earl. The dogs followed.

Holly and Matthew sat in the boat and watched until the company of horsemen and the dogs went back into the forest, taking Nell Fisher with them.

“I suppose now we can go home,” Matthew said. “Nell Fisher seems to have found her Prince Charming. Only somehow I don’t like the guy.”

“He’s awful,” Holly agreed. “What do we do now, Albert?”

The cat was still on the bottom of the boat. “Lucky the earl didn’t notice me. Everybody around here knows I’m Nell’s cat.”

“Maybe the slipper could turn you into something else,” Matthew suggested. “Wouldn’t it be fun to be a bird for a change?”

“What makes you think it’s fun to be a bird?” Albert said. “Watch one sometime. They’re always on the lookout for danger.”

Matthew laughed. “Slipper might turn you into a boy.”

“Or a girl,” Holly told the cat. “We have fun.”

The cat shudderd. “I’d have to wear clothes, and eat with a fork.”

Holly bent down to pet the cat. “It would only be for a little while, silly!”

“Don’t be too sure,” Albert said. “Magic is dangerous. I might get stuck the way Nell is.”

Holly stopped petting him. “What do you mean, Albert?”

“How is Nell Fisher stuck?” Matthew asked the cat.

Albert jumped onto the seat. “A witch cannot weep,” he told the children. “They can pretend to cry, but they cannot really shed tears. When Nell looked at herself in the water, tears came into her eyes. Because of that she is no longer a witch and cannot go back to being one.”

“But I thought she was tried as a witch, and found innocent,” Holly said.

“She didn’t drown,” Matthew reminded his sister.

“You tricked us, Albert,” Holly said. “You never told us she was a witch!”

Albert stood up and stretched. “I never said she wasn’t. But, witch or not, she’s still my friend, and something tells me she still needs help.”

Holly stroked the cat’s back. She picked up an oar. “On to the castle, Matt!”

18

The boat followed the current going downstream. Matthew and Holly didn't have to row much. Most of the time they just steered.

The sun was high in the sky now. Albert stayed in the bottom of the boat. Now and then he peeked over the side.

They passed a number of sheep in the fields on one side of the river. A man holding a long stick with a curved end was watching over them.

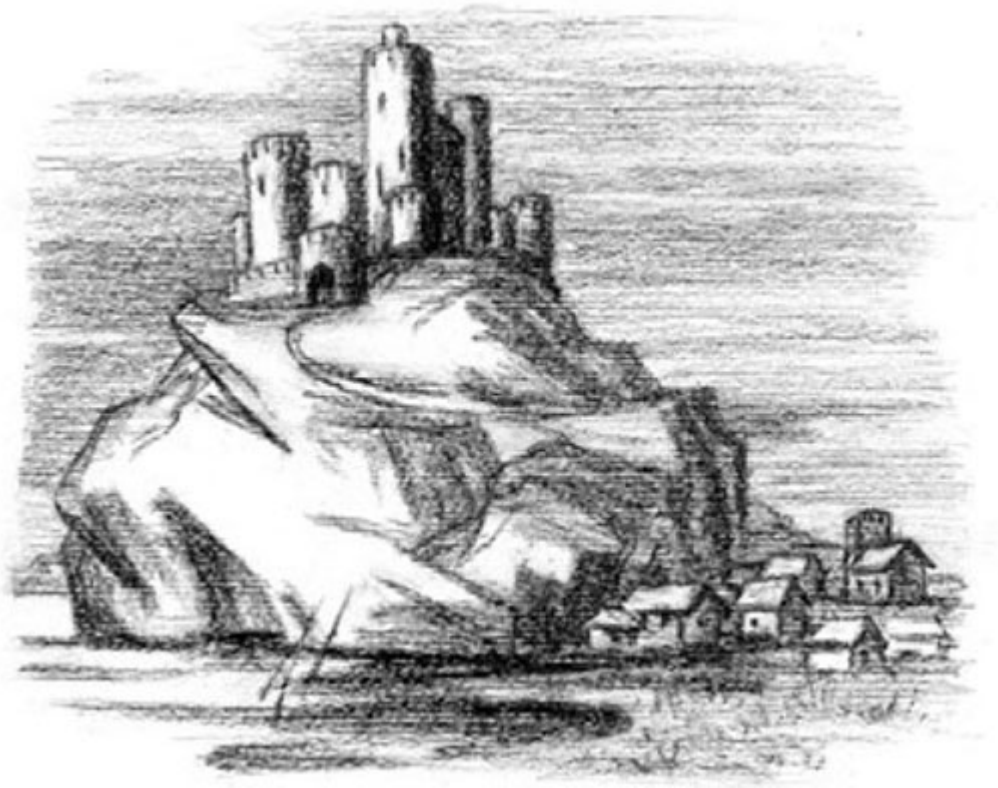
When the boat came to a burned patch of ground, the cat said, "That's where Nell Fisher's cottage used to be."

“She told us it was her neighbors who burned it,” Matthew said. “I don’t see any neighbors.”

Albert hid under the seat of the boat. “She meant the people in the town we’re coming to.”

Matthew and Holly rowed the boat around a bend of the river. Ahead of them they saw a number of houses with roofs of woven straw or slabs of slate.

Beyond the town a huge rock rose high out of the river. A gray stone castle with round towers and notched battlements was built on top of the rock.



“If nobody has knocked them down in my absence,” the cat said from under the seat, “you should be looking at Garrick Town and Castle Garrick.”

“You’re in danger here, Albert,” Matthew said.

“If you wrap me in your shirt and let Holly carry me, people might not know I was a cat.” Albert gave a cry that sounded like a

baby's wail. "If anybody wants to know why you're without a shirt, tell them you're using it to keep me warm."

Holly and Matthew rowed the boat to the shore. They took off their shoes, tied the laces together, and hung them around their necks. Then they rolled up the legs of their jeans and stepped into the shallow water.

Matthew took off his T-shirt. Holly pulled the cat out from under the seat of the boat, rolled him in the baggy shirt, and carried him ashore.

Matthew put both hands on the boat. "Slipper," he whispered, "I know Albert claims to be Master of the Magic, but after all, you are my slipper, so would you please return to your old size, so I can put you into my pocket."

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then Matthew found that he was holding the red corduroy slipper in his hands. He stuffed it into the side pocket of his jeans.

Holly was busy making sure that Albert could breathe under the shirt.

"I can't see," the cat said, "but it doesn't matter. My nose tells me where we are. There's a path above the riverbank that leads to the town."

Matthew and Holly took turns holding the cat while they put on their shoes.

Holly looked around. “Matt!” she whispered. “I can’t see the boat anywhere! It must have drifted away and sunk.”

“The boat’s safe, Holly,” Matthew said. “It’s here in my pocket.”

Holly poked a finger into his pocket and stroked the soft corduroy. Then she took the cat and climbed after her brother to the top of the bank.

They followed the path leading to the town. As they walked, the houses became closer together. From the path the children could look down and see docks along the waterfront with boats next to them. Beyond the docks the river curved around the castle rock.

On the other side of the river was the forest. Matthew pointed to where a horseman was galloping his horse across the river to a ramp near the docks. “It must be shallow there.”

As Holly and Matthew watched, a pack of hounds came out of the forest and waited on the shore until another rider followed and ordered them into the water. Then the dogs swam across.

A gray-haired woman walking along the path stopped to watch. “You’re strangers,” she said. “That’s the hunting party from the castle. And there’s Earl Robert.” She stared at the sight of Nell Fisher riding proudly in front of the earl. “He seems to have caught something other than a deer. Well, it’s none of my business.”

The rest of the hunting party came out of the forest and splashed across the river. The sun began to go down behind the trees of the

forest. The sky turned pink and then gray. A cold wind began to blow.

The woman looked at Matthew. “Who are you, and what are you doing without a shirt?”

Holly answered for him. “His name is Matthew. I am his sister Holly. Matthew lent his shirt to Albert here, who has no clothes at all.”

The cat let out a little cry.

Holly patted the shirt. “Sh-h-h!”

“Where are your parents?” the woman demanded.

“We don’t know where our parents are,” Matthew told her. “We’re on our way to the castle. We’re friends of the lady the earl has on his horse. We don’t know the earl, but he has taken away our friend.”

“As I said before, it isn’t my business,” the woman said, “but I do know the earl, and I don’t like him. My name is Meg Turner, and I want to help you. You’ll have a better chance of getting into the

castle if you have a shirt. My cottage is down the road a bit. I think I have something you can wear. Come along."

20

Holly and Matthew followed Meg Turner to a small cottage. It was built of layers of mud and woven reeds and coated with white plaster. The roof was a thick thatch of mud covered with dry grass and leaves. The land around the cottage was separated from the neighbors' fields by ridges of earth.

It was twilight now and getting darker every minute. Meg Turner opened her door. "Come in, children," she said.

Matthew and Holly stepped into the house. It was just one room.

There was a small window in each wall. The windows were criss-crossed with strips of wood, but there was no glass in them. It was dark outside now. The only light in the room came from a small fire glowing on a stone slab in the middle of the floor. The smoke escaped through a hole in the roof.

Meg Turner took a two-foot-long reed that had been dipped in fat and lit it from the fire. It burned like a candle.

She walked over to a large wicker trunk against one wall. “Come here, Matthew.” She handed him the candle, opened the trunk, and took out a tunic. It was woven of unbleached black and white wool that looked speckly gray.

“This belonged to my son.” Meg Turner took the candle. “He was no taller than you. Put it on.”

Matthew slipped the tunic on over his head. It reached halfway between his waist and his knees.

“You’ll need a sash.” Meg Turner gave him one. Matthew knotted it around his waist. “Thank you, Mrs. Turner.”

“No fancy Mistress Turner. Everyone calls me Meg,” she said.

“Well, then, thank you, Meg. Now we’d better go to the castle.” Matthew walked to the door and opened it. Holly followed him, holding the cat, who was still wrapped in Matthew’s shirt.

They looked out at the blackest night they had ever seen. There were no lights in the houses and no street lamps. There was not even a moon.

Meg Turner closed the door. “It’s too late. You can go to the castle in the morning. You must be hungry. What have you had to eat today?”

Holly thought for a moment. “Waffles, fish, and blackberries,” she said.

Meg Turner put the candle in a holder on the table. She went to a cupboard on the wall and took out a loaf of bread, three rosy apples, a wedge of cheese, and a jug of cider and put them on the table.

Next she set out three pottery bowls and filled them with soup from a large pot steaming on the hearthstone. “Would the baby like a bowl of porridge?” she asked.

“I think he’d do better with a cup of milk,” Matthew told her.

21

“Is there something the matter with the baby?” Meg Turner asked. “Holly seems to be hiding him.”

“He’s afraid to have people see him,” Matthew said.

“Poor child.” Meg Turner poured milk into a pottery mug and handed it to Holly. “What happened to his mother?”

“We don’t know.” Holly held the mug under the shirt the cat was wrapped in. She felt Albert’s whiskers brush her hand as he lapped the milk. She had to keep tipping the mug as the cat drank.

“Put the baby to sleep on the bed over there.” Meg Turner pointed to a pile of straw in one corner of the room. “Then you can eat your supper in peace.”

After Albert had finished his milk, Holly laid him down and came back to the table. Meg Turner cut thick slices of crusty bread to eat with the soup.

“Where is your son, whose shirt I’m wearing, Meg?” Matthew asked.

“Earl Robert dragged him off to war, along with my husband,” Meg Turner said. “They were both killed, but the earl returned with gold and spices and rich cloth he’d captured. He never helped the widows and orphans his war made. I could understand if his castle and our town were attacked. Then it would be our duty to fight. But this was a war that didn’t concern us. It was just to bring glory and riches to the earl.”

“I knew there was something about him I didn’t like,” Matthew said.

The three of them ate the rest of the meal in silence. The reed candle was getting short. Both Holly and Matthew helped Meg Turner clean the dishes and put away the leftover food.

They all took off their shoes and each found a soft place in the straw. Meg Turner blew out the light. In almost no time they were fast asleep.

Holly woke to the sound of a rooster crowing. She sat up and rubbed her eyes. The first pale gray light of morning was coming through the little square windows. She had to shake Matthew before he would open his eyes. Even then it took a moment or two before he remembered where he was. Then he yawned and stretched and reached over to pick up his shirt with the cat curled up in it.

Meg Turner was up and busy stirring something in a pot on the hearthstone. “There’s a well in the yard if you want to wash your face and tidy up,” she said. “You should try to look your best when you reach the castle.”

Holly put on her shoes, took the shirt and the cat from her brother, and went outdoors.

Matthew found his shoes and shoved his feet into them. Then he too went out into the yard.

22

Holly put the cat next to the low stone wall around the well. Albert peeked out of the shirt.

Matthew arrived as Holly took hold of the wooden bucket on the wall. “I’ll help you with that pail in a minute. But first I want my shirt back. Albert can hide just as well in this tunic.”

“I’d rather keep the shirt,” the cat said.

“In the tunic, Matt, you look as if you belong around here, and we’ll be safer,” Holly said. “Besides, it would be rude to Meg Turner to take it off.”

“It’s itchy,” Matthew said. “You’re not the one who has to wear it.”

“Your T-shirt is soft and white, just right to wrap a baby in,” Holly persisted.

Matthew reached to grab the shirt.

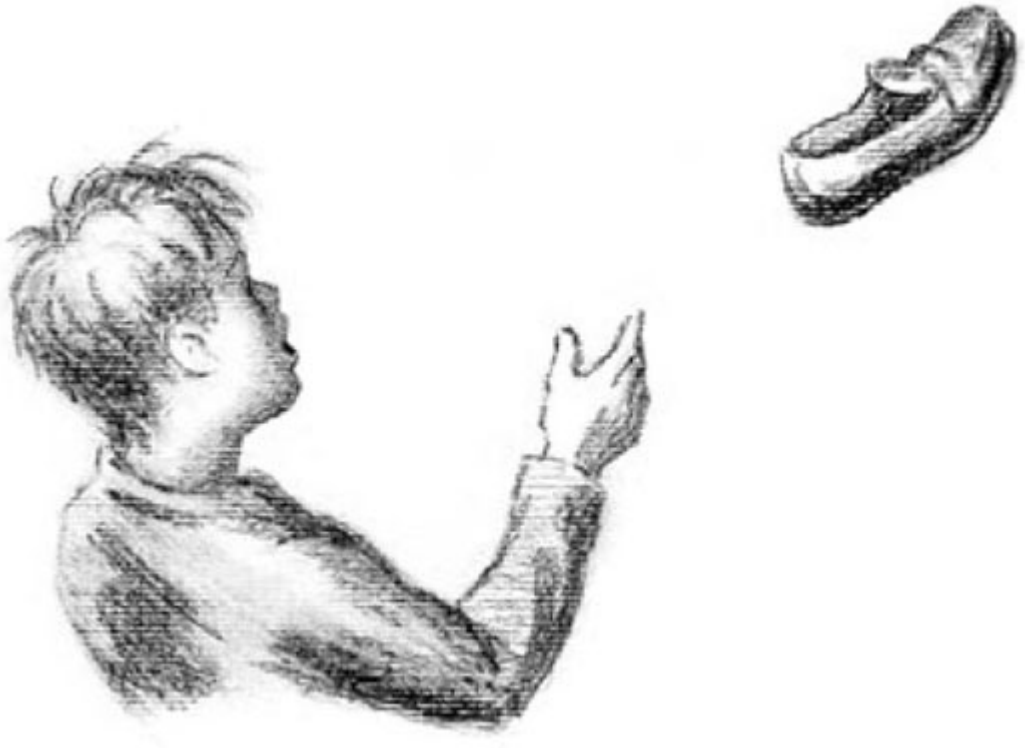
“Stop!” the cat said in a low voice. “Or I’ll have to take control. Don’t forget. I am the Master of the Magic!”

“That’s what you think.” Matthew pulled the slipper from his pocket. “Whose slipper are you?”

The slipper did not move.

“Slipper,” the cat commanded, “go to the castle and do what you can to help Nell Fisher. We will meet you there.”

The slipper trembled. Matthew tried to hold on to it, but it wiggled out of his hand and flew away before he knew what was happening.



“Albert’s right, Matt,” Holly said. “We have to listen to him. I’m sorry you don’t want to wear the tunic. It looks good on you. As soon as we’re away from Meg Turner’s house, I’ll put it on. Albert can have my shirt.”

Matt laughed. “You’d look silly in it.” He grabbed a rope and helped Holly lower the bucket that was tied to it into the well.

Together they pulled up the bucket of cool water. The children cupped their hands and drank from them.

Holly held the cat so he could lap from the pail. Then she washed her face and ran her wet fingers through her hair.

Matthew picked up his shirt, cat and all, and carried it into the house. “No hard feelings, Albert,” he said. “I had it coming to me.”

Meg Turner had a bowl of porridge with honey on it ready for each of the children and a cup of warm milk for Albert.

When they were ready to go, she handed Matthew a little basket. “Something to eat for the journey,” she said.

Meg Turner tipped her head to one side and looked hard at Matthew. “You look just as handsome in that tunic as my son did. I’m happy that I gave it to you.”

23

Holly carried the cat wrapped in Matthew's T-shirt, and Matthew took charge of the lunch basket. They followed the path above the river and walked into the little town.

"Look, Matt," Holly whispered. "That man is wearing a tunic like yours."

Matthew tried not to stare. "I'm glad I still have my jeans!"

The man's pants were tied to his legs with narrow strips of cloth.

"They're better than those long baggy dresses the girls here are wearing," Holly said. "And what a job to have to braid all that hair!"

They came to an open square where a gray stone church had been built. People were filling jugs with water from a well.

When Matthew and Holly left the town, the path began to go uphill. It was hard and stony now.

They went around a bend and looked down to see the river below them.

Albert poked his head out of Matthew's shirt. "We must be on Castle Rock," he said. "I've never dared to come here before."

They sat down beside the path and ate the bread, cheese, and apples in Meg Turner's basket.

Holly held the cat while he lapped milk from a little jar with a wooden stopper.

From above came the sound of horses' hooves on the stony path.

Matthew grabbed Albert and wrapped him in his shirt. Holly jammed the stopper back into the jar and started to crunch an apple.

Three men on horseback came rattling down the hill, sending stones rolling onto the picnickers. The horses galloped on toward the town.

Holly went back to eating her apple and giving Albert his milk.

Between bites of bread and cheese, Matthew said to the cat, “I don’t understand why the slipper kept doing things for both Holly and me and then, all of a sudden, it would only obey you.”

“You two kept giving orders I would like to have thought of,” Albert told him. “The slipper never heard me object.”

“Let’s not waste time talking about it,” Holly said. “We have to get into the castle.”

It was a long hike to the top of Castle Rock. Matthew and Holly had to step off the path so a man driving a donkey cart could get by. He was going to town to buy food for the castle.

They were out of breath when at last they came to a thick fence of pointed tree trunks. A man with a spear was guarding the heavy oak gates in the fence. He let the people coming out of the gates pass him. But when Holly and Matthew tried to walk in, he barred the way with his spear. “What do you two boys have in that bundle?”

Albert let out a wail.

The guard stroked his beard.

Matthew opened his mouth to say something, but his sister stepped on his foot to stop him.

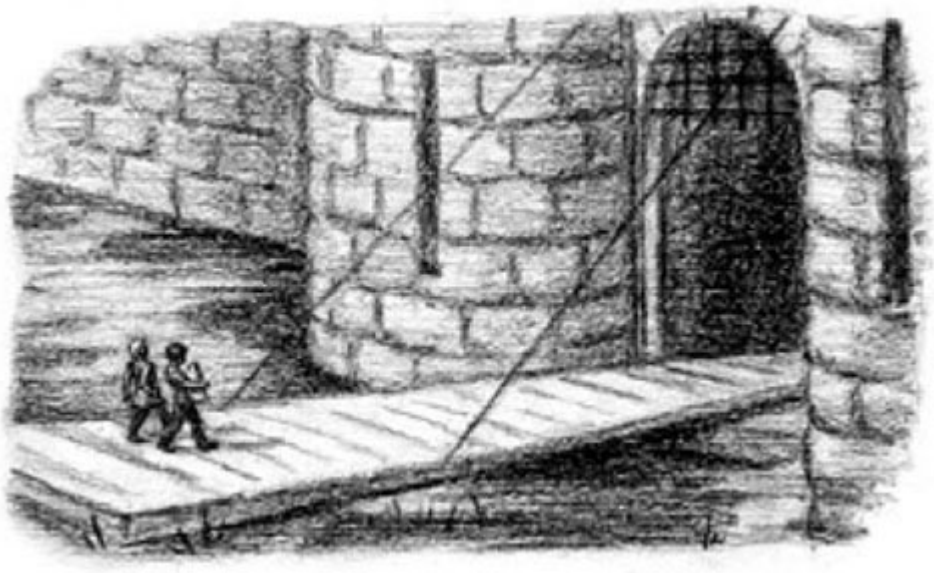
Holly had short curly hair and wore jeans. She decided to let people here think she was a boy. “Yesterday the earl put our friend Lady Eleanor in front of him on his horse to bring her here. He told my brother and me there was not room for us on the horse, but that we would be welcome at Castle Garrick.”

The guard started to laugh, but stopped. “It’s his idea of a joke, but I’m sure it’s not funny to you.” He took a good look at the children. “Take that hungry baby to the cookhouse and tell Osmond, the head cook, that Ethelbert said to give you boys something to eat. Now go in and keep quiet about this. Osmond is a friend of mine and I don’t want him to get into trouble.” The guard raised his spear to let them walk through the gateway.

24

A wide strip of land went around the castle like a road. Holly and Matthew had to duck out of the way of two teenaged boys riding horseback.

They came to a ditch filled with water. “That’s what they call a moat,” Matthew said. “Look, there’s a drawbridge!”



They crossed the bridge. The iron grating on the other side was up. Holly and Matthew walked under it and through an arch in a stone wall that was thicker than any wall they’d ever seen before.

Beyond the wall was a large courtyard full of busy people and farm animals. Holly looked around. Within the courtyard she saw another moat and a drawbridge leading to an even thicker wall.

Rising high on the other side of that wall was an enormous round tower.

"It was nice of Ethelbert to tell us how to get food," Holly said, "but I'm not hungry right now."

"Neither am I," her brother agreed. "Let's explore the castle."

They looked into a carpenter shop in the courtyard. A man there was sawing a tree trunk into thick boards. He put down his saw and smiled at Holly and Matthew. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"Have you seen a pretty lady in a blue dress with white daisies on it? The earl brought her to the castle yesterday."

"Everybody saw her," the carpenter said. "We were all waiting to see what the earl would bring home from the hunt."

"Where can we find her?" Holly asked.

"The earl took her to the donjon." The man picked up his saw and went back to work.

Holly looked at her brother. "Why would he put her in the dungeon?" she whispered.

“Maybe he found out who she was,” Matthew said in an even softer whisper.

Now a loud whisper came from the T-shirt Holly was carrying. “A donjon is not a dungeon!”

Holly carried the hidden cat away from the carpenter shop. “There’s nobody very close to us, Matt. If Albert says anything, I’ll move my lips, so people will think I’m the one who’s talking.”

“Did you hear that, Albert?” Matthew said.

The cat started to whisper, and Holly silently moved her lips.

“The donjon is the big strong tower in the middle of a castle,” Albert told them. “The lord of a castle and his guests live in the upper part of the tower. The dungeon is in the lowest place under the tower. It is a dark, damp, rat-infested prison.”

When Albert finished, Holly stopped pretending to talk and said, “I guess we’d better visit the donjon, Matt.”

Matthew grinned. “The upper part of the tower.”

Holly walked quickly across the busy courtyard to the drawbridge that crossed the inner moat. Her brother hurried to keep up with her.

People were walking back and forth across the bridge. Some of them seemed to be carrying something for those who lived in the tower. Two young women had baskets of laundry. A man with an apron

held a covered dish from the cookhouse. There was a peddler with a pack on his back. Servants struggled with heavy pails of water.

The guard on the bridge let all these people pass, but he stopped people who were empty-handed.

"Slow down, Holly," Matthew said. "I think it's time we went to see Osmond."

25

It was easy to find the cookhouse. Matthew and Holly just followed their noses. The smell of roasting meat came from a stone building in the courtyard. It had a high pointed roof with a hole in the center to let the smoke out. They walked through an open doorway.

A fire burned on a great stone hearth. Many different cooks were busy preparing food. Holly saw a man with a cleaver hacking up the carcass of a large animal. Another man was skinning and cutting up rabbits. He dropped them into an enormous pot. A woman was putting carrots and onions into the same pot.

Matthew was glad he didn't have to crank a spit to roast the row of geese on it. The boy who had this job worked close to the fire and was covered with sweat.

One man walked around the fire, watching how things were cooking. "You need more water in the pot," he told the woman adding vegetables to the stew.

Holly walked over to him, carrying the cat in the T-shirt. Matthew went after her.

"We're looking for Osmond," Holly said.

Albert let out a pitiful wail.

"I'm Osmond," the man told her.

Holly jiggled the cat as if he were a baby. "Ethelbert told us you would give us something to eat."

"Of course I will. You're strangers here. Any friend of Ethelbert's is a friend of mine." Osmond took a wooden platter from a pile of them on a big table. He walked around the cookhouse and loaded the platter with the nicest cuts of meat from the fire. Then he went to the big baskets of fruit that were in the shade of a tree in the courtyard. He chose the prettiest peaches and plums and put them on the platter. Finally he added a loaf of bread that had been baked in the big stone oven near the cookhouse. "How's that?"

"Wonderful! Thank you," Holly said.

Osmond gave the platter to Matthew to carry. "Don't eat it near the cookhouse," he whispered. "Or everyone will be asking me for the same." He went back to his work.

Matthew carried the tray of food before him as if he were in a parade. "Hold Albert up like a present," he told his sister.

Holly walked proudly behind Matthew holding the cat in front of her chest.

They crossed the courtyard to the inner drawbridge. The guard on the bridge let them pass and go through the gate in the tremendous

wall.

Now they were in a well-kept rose garden. And right ahead was the towering donjon.

26

The guard at the door of the donjon looked at the tray of food Matthew was carrying. “It’s early for dinner,” he said. “Who’s getting that?”

“We’re taking it to Lady Eleanor of Fiswell,” Matthew told him.

“Well, you’d better hurry before it gets cold. She’s in the room at the top of the west tower.” The guard stepped aside to let Matthew and Holly pass.

They walked into a narrow passage. There were several stairways going up from it. “I wonder which stair is to the west tower,” Holly said.

Albert started to whisper. At once Holly began to move her lips and pretend to be the one who was talking.

“If I were on the ground, my nose would tell me where Nell is,” the cat said. “You could follow me.”

“Suppose somebody saw you?” Matthew said.

“I could run,” Albert whispered. “There are lots of places to hide in a castle.”

Holly was still moving her lips. She wanted to remind the cat that she and her brother could never go home if Albert left them, but Matthew said, “It’s dark here. Holly will put you down.” He nodded to his sister. “Go ahead, but pretend you’re still carrying something in my shirt.”

Holly looked around the shadowy hall. There was no one in sight. She unwrapped Albert from the T-shirt and bent down to put him on the stone floor.

The cat stretched his legs, lifted his head to sniff the air, and trotted down the passage. When he came to a stair, he stopped and sniffed all around it. Then he continued down the winding passage. Matthew and Holly went after him.

Albert stopped at another stair and began to check that one. Before he finished checking, two young men came chasing each other down the stair. The cat turned and ran back down the hall. Holly threw the T-shirt over him and picked him up. She held him in front of her as she had before and kept walking.

The two young men were coming toward the children.

“Did you see that rat?” Matthew said to them.

“A real monster,” one of them said.

The other agreed. “It was as big as a cat! Come on, Cuthbert, let’s get out of here.”

As soon as the young men were out of sight, Albert wiggled out of the T-shirt and jumped to the ground. He trotted along with his nose

on the ground. When they came to a narrow twisting stair, he started right up.

Matthew and Holly were close behind him.

27

The stairway led to a different floor. The children followed the cat through a maze of narrow passages and past several rooms. Albert stopped at the foot of a winding staircase. Holly and Matthew heard the faint sound of voices coming from overhead.

Holly unfolded the T-shirt. The cat came over to be wrapped up. Holding the tray of food, Matthew led the way up the stairs.

They went higher. The voices were louder. The stair ended at a door.

Holly tapped on the door. It was opened by the earl!

He stared at the two children. Then he smiled. “You’re here at last! I was afraid something had happened to you.” He pinched Holly’s cheek.

Holly could feel the cat's heart pounding under the T-shirt. Her heart began to pound too.

"Now that you're here," the earl said, "the lady will be happy." He looked at the food. "How lucky that you brought something for her to eat. She's not used to the castle food and hasn't touched a crumb in all the time she has been here." He opened the door wide for them to go in. Then he went out and shut the door behind him.

They were in a room with windows set high in the walls. Nell Fisher and two other ladies were seated at a table piled high with cloth, sewing.

Nell was even prettier than they remembered.

"Ow! I just stuck myself with this dratted needle." Nell Fisher stood up and let her sewing fall on the floor. She ran over to the children and hugged them. "I'm so glad to see you. This is a terrible place. I always thought it would be fun to see how the fine ladies live. But it's boring! I don't know what I would have done without Elspeth and Selma. They haven't eaten because I wouldn't, and they've been sewing all day just to make me a present."

"Eat!" Nell Fisher commanded the ladies. She grabbed a slice of meat from the platter. "M-m-m-m. I'm starved!"

Matthew carried the tray of food over to the two ladies and placed it on the table near them. They put down their sewing and began to eat.

"Nell," Holly whispered. "Here's Albert."

Nell Fisher looked at the bundle of T-shirt and cat. "Give him to me." She took Albert and his wrappings and went to get another piece of meat from the tray.

"I didn't know you had a baby, Eleanor," Elspeth said.

Nell Fisher didn't answer. She carried Albert and the T-shirt to a large pile of straw in one corner of the room. "I'd better give him his dinner in bed."

"There must be something terribly wrong with him," Selma whispered. The two ladies clucked their tongues in sympathy.

28

Nell went back to the tray of food. “Come and join us. There’s enough for everybody,” she told the children. She turned to the ladies. “These are my friends Holly and Matthew.”

“Fine-looking boys,” Selma said.

“Yes,” Elspeth agreed. “But I’ll have to work on those leggings the little one is wearing. I’m sure I can improve them. I love to sew.”

When they had all finished eating, the two ladies picked up their sewing again.

The door opened and the earl came into the room. He walked over to Matthew. “Clench your fist, lad!” He felt Matthew’s arm. “Splendid! Tomorrow you can join me in a little expedition to punish the scoundrel from Castle Brandon who’s been hunting in my forest.”

Holly felt cold all over. She remembered what had happened to Meg Turner’s son.

“The little one can serve you as a page, my lady,” the earl told Nell Fisher. He turned and left the room.

Suddenly Holly caught sight of the toe of a red bedroom slipper poking out from under a pile of cloth on the table. She quietly took the slipper and carried it over to the pile of straw. “Master of the Magic, do your stuff!” she whispered, and shoved the slipper into the folded T-shirt.

Albert stuck his black, whiskery face out of the T-shirt. He was holding the red bedroom slipper in his mouth.

Elspeth took one look at the cat and let out a hair-raising scream. She hurried to open the door. Selma jumped to her feet and followed her. Both ladies ran down the winding stair as fast as they could in their long dresses.

Albert placed the slipper on the floor. “Slipper, get ready to take all four of us to Brooklyn! Hurry!”

Nothing happened.

They could hear heavy footsteps coming up the stair.

The cat sniffed the slipper. “Something’s happened to it. The slipper doesn’t smell of magic anymore!”

29

The herb mixture must have worn off the slipper, Holly thought. Now there was no way for them to go home again.

The footsteps on the stairs were coming closer.

Matthew picked up the slipper. “Of course it isn’t magic! This isn’t my beat-up old slipper. It’s brand new, and it’s not even corduroy. It’s velvet!”

Nell Fisher grabbed the slipper and lifted the hem of her long dress. She was wearing two red slippers. She took one off and gave it to Matthew. “Is this what you’re looking for?” She put on the other slipper.

Matthew placed the slipper on the floor. “Do your best, Slipper!”

The earl was at the door now.

Holly wished Matthew had let Albert work the magic.

The earl stood in the doorway with his fist in the air, but the slipper had cast a spell, and he couldn't get into the room.

The slipper became bigger and bigger until there was room for Holly and Matthew to sit with Nell Fisher between them holding Albert on her lap.

When the slipper rose in the air, the earl rushed into the room. By that time the slipper had become small enough to go through the lattice of the window. It soared higher and higher to leave the castle behind and race forward through time.

"Nobody told me that slipper was magic," Nell Fisher said. "When I found it on the floor, I tried it on. It was so much better than the awful things I was wearing that Elspeth and Selma decided to copy it and make me a new pair. Selma finished hers first. I was wearing Matthew's slipper while Elspeth worked on hers."

Nell Fisher admired the tunic. Matthew took it off and gave it to her. He put on his T-shirt. It had cat hairs on it and was itchier than the tunic.

The window of Holly's room in the Dorritys' house was still wide open. The slipper flew into her bedroom and landed on the floor. As soon as Holly and Matthew climbed out, they returned to their usual size. The slipper was still tiny. It rose up and sailed out the window with Albert and Nell Fisher.

"I wonder where the slipper is taking them," Matthew said. "I didn't hear Albert give any commands."

Holly thought about this. "The slipper seems to have a mind of its own now. Look what it did to the earl!"

Matthew changed his shirt, and Holly combed her hair. They went downstairs. Mr. Dorrity was busy with the crossword puzzle, and Mrs. Dorrity was working in her garden.

"What do you think the herbs were that got smeared on to my slipper?" Matthew asked. "Maybe there's some of the mixture still on the floor."

"Let's go see." Holly and Matthew started up the stairs. They met Albert on the way down. "Where's Nell Fisher?" Holly asked.

"She just got a job in the circus," the cat told them. "She did a few acrobatic tricks and proved she could ride on an elephant's head. The manager said she was the prettiest acrobat he'd ever seen.

"By the way, Matt, I put your slipper with the other one under your bed. It needs a rest, and I need some of your grandmother's leftovers."

Albert ran downstairs to the kitchen.

RUTH CHEW

THE WITCH'S GARDEN

with illustrations by the author

“Hot dogs never taste this good when Mother cooks them in the kitchen,” Susan said. “It was a great idea to have a picnic in the yard, Josh.”

Her cousin grinned. “I have lots of good ideas, Sue.” He finished his hot dog and licked his fingers. Then he pushed another frankfurter onto a skinny stick. Josh had cut the stick from the apple tree in the yard. He held it over the little campfire on the flagstone walk.

When the frankfurter was black all over, Josh put it in a roll. He took a big bite.

“Meow!” A fat calico cat jumped off the high board fence between Susan’s yard and the one next door. The cat ran over to Josh.

“Okay, okay, Patchwork. I get the message.” Josh gave the end of his frankfurter to the cat.

“Now I know why Patchwork likes you so much, Josh.” Susan tried to poke her stick through a tiny marshmallow.

“When I was here last summer,” Josh said, “Patchwork slept on my bed every night.”

Josh bent down to scratch Patchwork behind the ears. The cat rubbed against the leg of his jeans. She looked up into his face and purred.

Josh watched Susan trying to get the stick through the marshmallow. “You’ll never do it, Sue. Those tiny marshmallows aren’t meant for toasting. My mom uses them to make fudge.”

“These were the only ones I could find.” Susan went into the house and came back with a big fork. “We can toast two marshmallows at once,” she told Josh. “You use one prong of the fork. And I’ll use the other.”

The little marshmallows kept catching fire. They tasted like cinders. Patchwork sniffed one and went back to the fence.

Susan got a needle and thread. She sat down under the apple tree and strung six marshmallows.

“That looks just like a string of beads, Sue,” Josh said.

Susan tied the ends of the thread tightly around a prong of the big fork. “Hold this over the fire, Josh.”

The fire melted the marshmallows together into a gooey lump. The lump caught fire. Josh blew it out. The outside of the lump was black. But inside it was soft and bubbly. Josh ate it slowly. He pulled the thread out and sucked the sticky marshmallow off it. “You’re a genius, Sue.” He handed her the fork. “Your turn.”

Susan tied another string of little marshmallows onto the fork. “The fire’s almost out, Josh. And we’ve burned all the dead sticks from the rose bushes. What’ll we use now?”

Josh climbed up into the branches of the apple tree. “There’s nothing we can burn here.” He looked over the fence that the cat

was sitting on. “Hey, Sue, a dead branch from your tree has fallen into the neighbor’s yard. Who lives next door?”

“Nobody,” Susan told him.

Josh looked at the house. All the houses on the block were joined together. On the outside they looked alike. But the blinds in this one were pulled down.

“If nobody lives there,” Josh said, “nobody would mind if we took some old dead sticks.”

Susan looked at the high fence. “How are we going to get over that?”

“If you have a rope, I’ll show you,” Josh said.

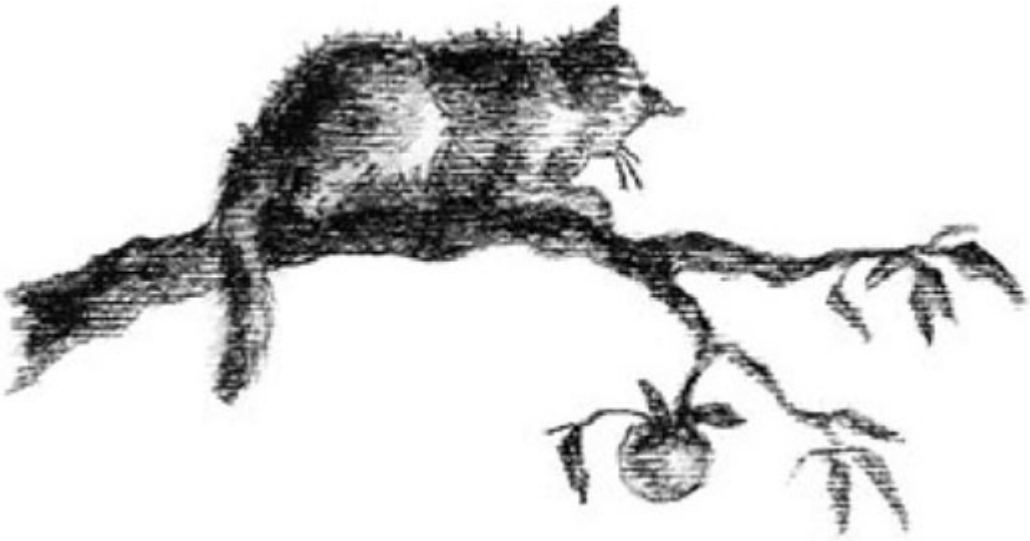
“Mother has some clothesline in the basement,” Susan said.

Josh climbed down from the tree. “Come on, Sue. Let’s go look for it.”

2

Josh and Susan looked all over the basement. At last they found some clothesline on the top of the tall freezer in the laundry room. Susan had to stand on the step-ladder to reach it. She handed the clothesline to Josh. Then they went back into the yard.

The cat was sitting in the apple tree. She was looking down into the yard next door.



Josh looped the rope over his shoulder and climbed into the tree. Susan came up after him.

The trunk of the apple tree grew in Susan's yard, close to the fence. Almost half the tree hung over the yard next door. Josh crawled along a thick branch that hung over the fence. He tied the

rope around the branch. Then he climbed down the rope to the yard below.

Susan sat on the branch and moved along sideways. She wasn't as good at climbing as Josh. But she didn't want him to know it. When she came to the rope she grabbed hold of it with her hands. She let her feet hang down and tried to wrap them around the rope. Her hands kept slipping. It seemed an age before she reached the ground.

Patchwork jumped from the branch to the fence. From the fence the cat leaped into the yard next door.

Josh was already snapping dry sticks off the fallen branch. Susan looked at the yard.

A row of tall sunflowers grew against the back fence. A cracked cement path went around the yard. Grass poked out of the cracks in the path. The flower beds were full of weeds. A thorny bush was covered with raspberries. And there were little fringed flowers growing next to the cement walk.

The air smelled sweet. Susan knelt down and buried her nose in the soft green leaves of one of the plants. "Josh, what does this make you think of?" Susan held out a leaf for him to smell.

Josh sniffed. "Chewing gum. It must be mint." He broke off several bunches of leaves and stuffed them into his pockets.

"Look at Patchwork," Susan said.

The cat was leaping around the garden. She chased her tail and rolled on the ground.

"She acts drunk," Josh said. "Maybe she got into some catnip."

Susan began to sniff the other plants.

Suddenly Josh grabbed her arm. He pointed to a small window in the back of the house.

Susan saw one of the slats on the venetian blind move. Someone was peeking through the window!

Josh ran to the rope. He climbed up, hand over hand, into the apple tree. Susan was close behind him. She didn't know she could climb so fast.

Josh and Susan heard the squeaky sound of a door opening. Someone was coming out into the yard next door.

The two children crawled along the branch of the tree and slid down the trunk into Susan's yard. Both of them were out of breath.

"Listen," Susan whispered.

Someone on the other side of the fence was laughing.

“I thought you said nobody lived in that house,” Josh said.

Susan didn’t answer. She was staring at the burned-out campfire.

Josh could tell from her face that something was wrong. “What’s the matter, Sue?”

“I forgot that Mother doesn’t want me to play with matches,” Susan told him.

“We weren’t playing. We were cooking our lunch,” Josh said. “Your mother told us to before she went shopping.” He pulled the top from a can of cherry soda. “Don’t worry about it, Sue. Let’s finish eating and clean up the mess we made.” He handed Susan the soda.

They drank the soda right from the cans. Susan ate the marshmallows she had strung together.

“They taste good even without toasting,” she said.

When the picnic was finished, Susan got a brown paper bag and a dustpan and brush. She started to sweep up the ashes and burnt sticks while Josh held the paper bag open.

“Do you think we ought to wash that off?” Josh pointed to a black burnt place on the flagstone walk.

“Oh, yes,” Susan said. “Daddy put the flagstones down. He wants them to look nice.” She went to get a pail of water and a Brillo pad.

Josh and Susan took turns scrubbing. But they couldn’t get the ugly black mark off the flagstones.

“It’s no use,” Susan said at last. She picked up the big fork. “I’d better wash this.”

Josh took a look at the fork. “That needs more than cleaning, Sue.”

Now Susan saw that the prongs of the fork weren’t shiny anymore. The flames had made them turn blue. And the smooth wooden handle of the fork was cracked from the heat of the fire.

Susan knew how much her mother liked the fork. It matched the fancy carving knife. Susan should never have used it over a campfire. And no matter what Josh said, Susan knew her mother didn’t want her to build fires. She felt like crying.

Josh looked at her face. “I’m sorry, Sue,” he said. “This is all my fault. The picnic was my idea.”

Josh dug his hands into his pockets. He pulled out a bunch of mint leaves. Some of them fell out of his hand onto the flagstone walk. They landed right in the middle of the black spot.

Josh leaned over and picked up the leaves. “Sue, look!”

Susan looked at the smoky mark on the flagstones. Where the leaves had been, the stain had vanished.

Josh put the bunch of mint leaves on another part of the smoky mark. Again the dark stain disappeared. He took more mint leaves out of his pocket. Josh covered the whole spot. When he picked up the leaves, the flagstone walk looked as if there had never been a fire burning there.

"I guess there's something in the leaves that cleans things," Susan said.

Josh crushed a handful of the leaves. He sniffed them. "They smell even more like chewing gum when they're mashed," he said.

"That's funny," Susan said. "Chewing gum sure doesn't clean things." She took the fork into the house.

Josh stuffed all the mint leaves back into his pockets. His fingers were all sticky and smelled of mint. He went to join Susan. She was standing at the kitchen sink scrubbing the big fork.

Susan looked up. "This is ruined, Josh." She held up the fork. "Mother is going to be angry."

"It's too late to do anything about it now, Sue. Let's just put it back where it belongs." Josh grabbed the fork with sticky fingers. "Where does your mother keep it?"

"In the buffet in the dining room. Come on. I'll show you." Susan took a red leather box out of the top drawer of the buffet. Josh put the fork into the box beside the carving knife.

Before she closed the lid of the box Susan took another look at the fork. "Josh!" she whispered. "Something's happened to it!"

Josh looked. Where his sticky fingers had held the handle, the wood was smooth and gleaming. All the ugly cracks were gone.

Josh couldn't believe his eyes. He touched one of the blue prongs. At once it shone like silver.

Josh picked up the fork and rubbed his fingers all over it. Then he handed it to Susan.

She stared at the shining fork. Then she put it in the box and closed the lid.

4

At suppertime Susan's mother said, "Bill, did you know we have a new neighbor?"

Both Susan and Josh stopped eating to listen.

Susan's father put down his fork. "You mean the Kerrigan house has been sold at last? Nobody has lived there for years."

"I don't think it was really *sold*," Mrs. Allen told him. "I heard that the owners are letting someone live there, just so the house won't be empty. Her name is Mrs. Muldoon."

"Well, I hope she cleans up that messy backyard." Mr. Allen cut open his baked potato. "By the way, Mary," he said, "what did you do with yesterday's *Times*? I haven't finished the crossword puzzle."

"I left it in the living room," Mrs. Allen said.

Josh looked at Susan. They both knew they had used the newspaper to light their campfire.

When it was time for dessert, Josh helped Susan clear the table. “Where did you put the paper bag with the ashes in it, Josh?” Susan whispered to him.

“In the kitchen waste basket,” he said.

Susan reached into Josh’s pocket and pulled out all the mint leaves. She opened the brown paper bag and dropped in the mint. Then she closed the bag tight and began to shake it.

Her mother walked into the kitchen, carrying a platter. She opened the refrigerator. Suddenly she caught sight of Susan. “What in the world are you doing, Susie?”

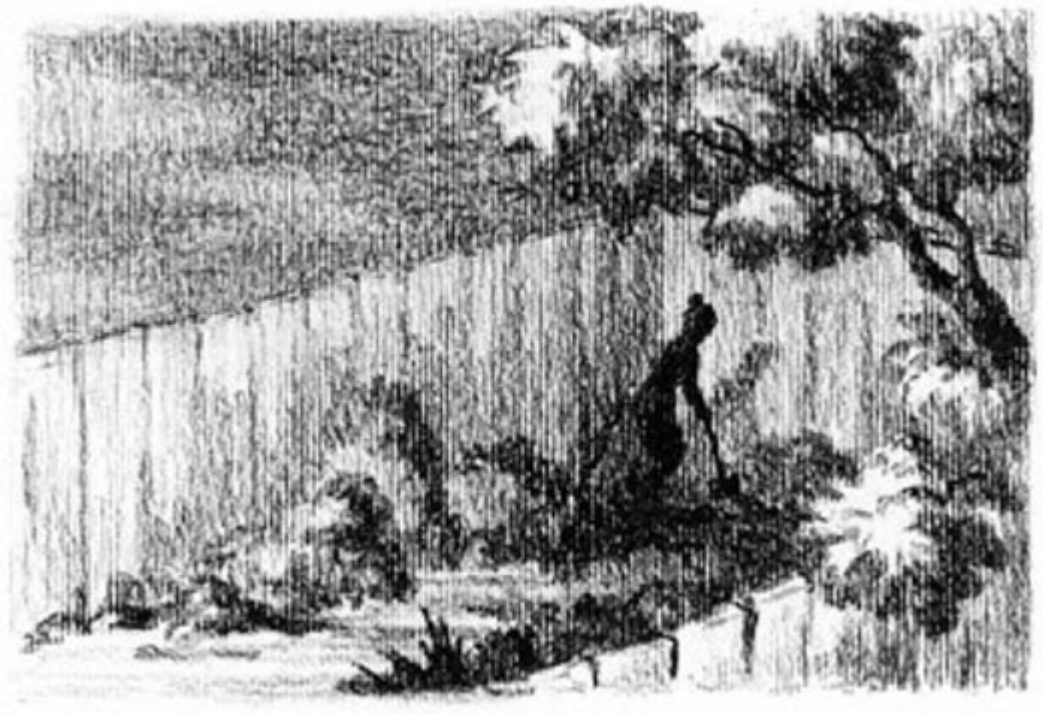
“Shaking a paper bag.” Susan opened the bag. Josh pulled yesterday’s *Times* out of it.

Mrs. Allen put what was left of the meat loaf in the refrigerator. She took the newspaper from Josh. “I’d better take charge of this,” she said. “There’s no telling what you and Susie might do with it.”

5

After supper Susan and Josh went upstairs to Susan's room at the back of the house. Josh stood at the window and looked out. It was still light outdoors.

"From here you can't tell that there's anything spooky about the yard next door," he said.



Susan walked over and looked down. "Look, Josh," she whispered, "there's the witch!"

A woman in a rusty brown dress was digging in a shadowy corner of the garden. She was small and thin and worked so quietly that Josh hadn't noticed her.

"Witch?" Josh said. "You mean Mrs. Muldoon."

"Don't you see, Josh," Susan went on in a low voice. "Mrs. Muldoon *is* a witch. You know that we were mixed up with *magic* today."

Josh nodded. "The mint leaves are magic all right. But that garden has been here for a long time. Mrs. Muldoon just moved in next door."

Susan didn't argue. She stared down at the woman and wondered what her face was like.

Josh was quiet for a while. The sky was getting darker. A firefly flashed in the apple tree. "Sue," Josh said at last, "what gave you the idea to use the mint leaves to get back the newspaper? I thought they were just good for cleaning things."

"I'm not quite sure what gave me the idea," Susan told him. "It just came into my head."

They heard Mrs. Allen calling. "Susie, Josh, come down here."

They left Susan's room and went downstairs. As they came closer to the kitchen Josh sniffed the air. "My favorite smell," he said.

Susan grinned. "I know. Chocolate cake."

Mrs. Allen came out of the kitchen. "Surprise, surprise," she said. "I baked two cakes, Josh. One for you, and one for our new neighbor. Before you kids eat yours, I want you to take a cake over to Mrs. Muldoon."

“You don’t like me to be out after dark,” Susan reminded her mother. “Couldn’t we take the cake to Mrs. Muldoon tomorrow?”

“What are you afraid of, Susie?” Mrs. Allen asked. “You only have to go next door. And Josh will be with you.”

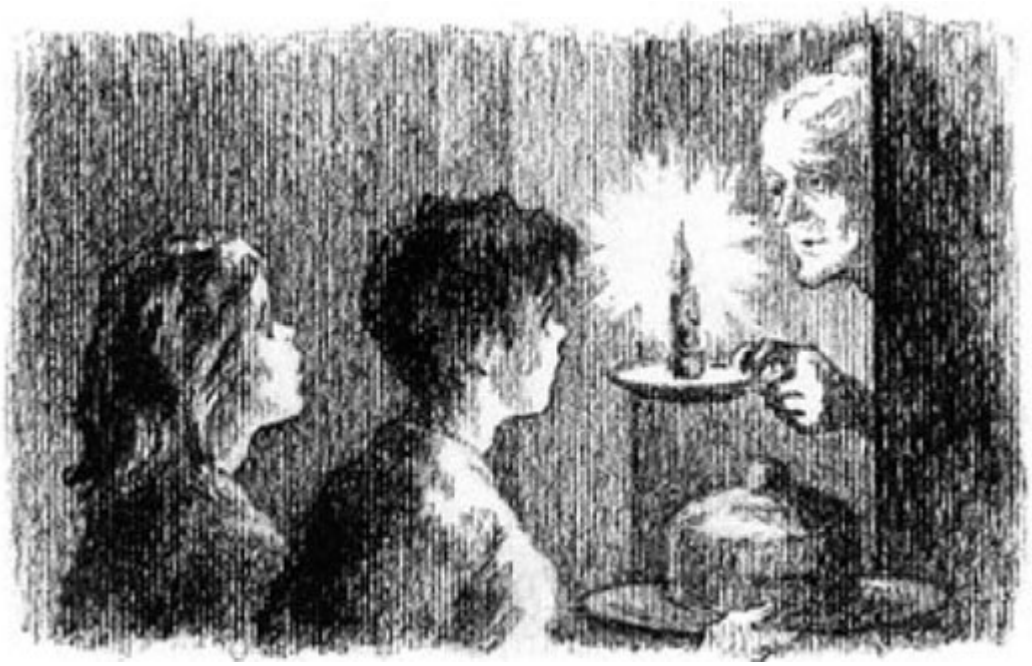
“Mrs. Muldoon is working in her garden, Aunt Mary,” Josh said. “We saw her from the window. She won’t hear her doorbell.”

“Ring it for a while then. I’d like her to get the cake when it’s fresh out of the oven.” Mrs. Allen handed Josh the big cake dish with the glass cover. “Just be careful how you hold it. Now run along. You can have a piece of your cake when you get back.”

Josh and Susan left the house by the front door. They walked down the front steps and up the steps next door. Josh was carrying the cake. Susan pressed the doorbell.

It was dark now. The street lights were on. But there were no lights in Mrs. Muldoon’s house.

“She must still be out in her yard.” Susan was just about to push the doorbell again when the door creaked open.



A small woman peeked out. She was holding a candle. By the flickering light her wrinkled face looked very very old.

Susan swallowed. Then she said, “I live next door. My mother baked a cake for you. Here it is.”

Josh held out the cake plate.

The little woman looked at her candle and then at the big plate. “Thank you,” she said. “Would you please bring the cake in for me?”

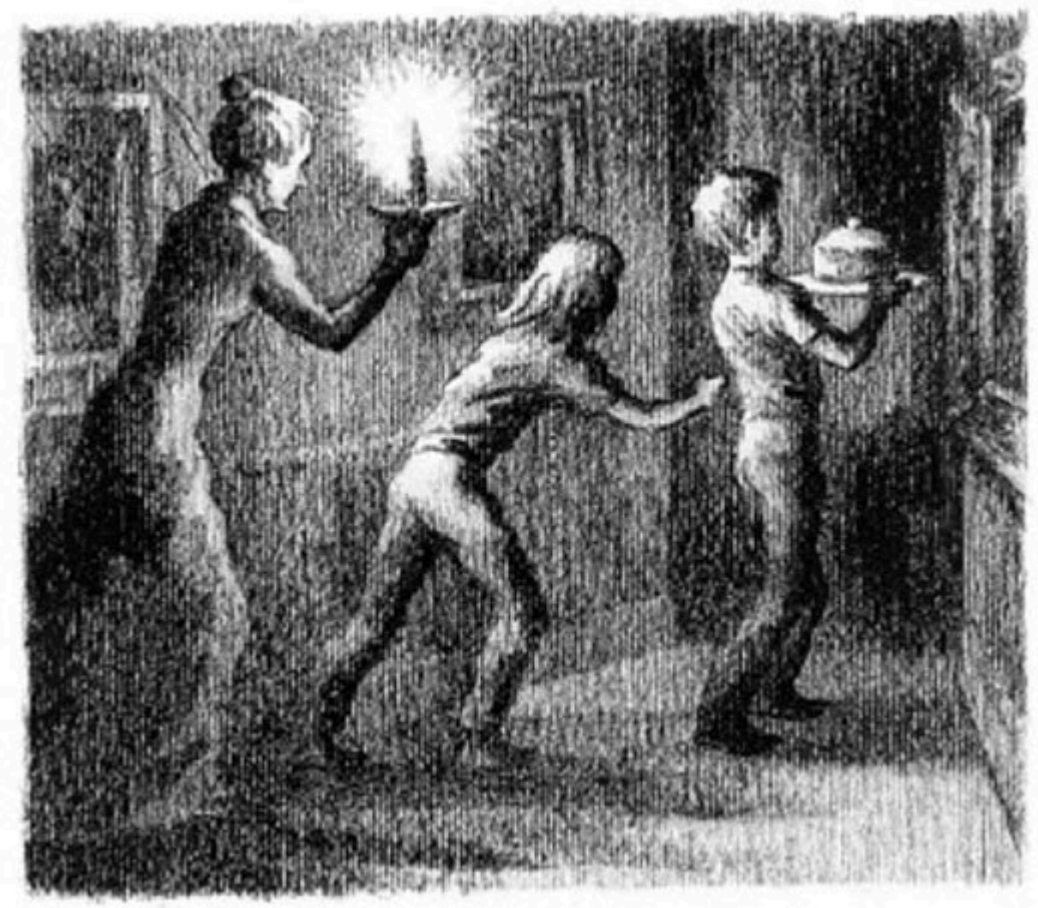
She opened the door wide and held the candle high to light the way. Josh stepped into the dark hall. “You too, dearie,” Mrs. Muldoon said.

Susan followed Josh into the house.

The candle cast strange shadows. Susan and Josh saw that the walls were covered with dark old paintings. There were cobwebs hanging from the carved frames.

Something small and furry brushed against Susan’s ankle. It ran away into the darkness before she could see whether it was a mouse or a rat.

They walked into the dining room. Josh put the cake plate on the big table.



Mrs. Muldoon set her candlestick down beside the cake. She opened the glass door of the tall breakfront. Then she took out three old plates with curly gold borders. Mrs. Muldoon laid the plates on the table and opened a drawer to get three heavy silver forks. “You’ll have some cake before you go.”

“Mother baked a cake for Josh too,” Susan said. “She wants this one to be all for you.”

“Cake tastes much better when it’s eaten in company.” Mrs. Muldoon took the cover off the cake dish. She pulled out a chair with claws on the ends of the legs.

As soon as the cover was taken off the cake the whole room smelled of chocolate. The smell was even stronger than it had been at home. Susan’s mouth began to water. She sat down in the chair with the claws.

Mrs. Muldoon pointed to a chair with a red velvet seat. “You may sit there, Josh.” She picked up a knife that was shaped like a dagger. She started to cut the cake.

7

The single candle flickered in the middle of the table. Shadows danced on the cracked ceiling. Susan saw something on the narrow shelf above the oak panels. It looked like a bat.

"Why do you use candles?" Josh asked. "Did the electric company turn off your power?"

Mrs. Muldoon nodded. She looked around at the shadows and smiled a funny smile. "But anyway I *like* candles."

Mrs. Muldoon was sawing away at the cake with her dagger. She cut three very crumbly pieces. Susan and Josh each got a fat wedge. But Susan noticed that Mrs. Muldoon gave herself a very small piece of cake. When she tasted it Mrs. Muldoon looked as if she felt sick. She went into the kitchen and came back with a steaming cup of

something that didn't smell like tea or coffee. Mrs. Muldoon took a sip. She seemed to feel better at once.

"I hope you'll forgive me for not offering you anything to drink," she said. "There's no milk in the house. And this wouldn't be good for you." She took another sip from her cup.

Josh finished his piece of cake. Mrs. Muldoon sawed off another big hunk and gave it to him.

"We saw you working in your garden," Josh said.

"It's in terrible shape," Mrs. Muldoon told him. "No one has been taking care of those poor plants."

"Who planted them?" Susan asked.

"My aunt Martha," Mrs. Muldoon said. "She liked all sorts of strange flowers. I don't even know what some of them are. There are some tall things at the back with big yellow flowers on them."

“Those are sunflowers,” Susan said.

“Oh, sunflowers. I’ve heard of them before. Why would Aunt Martha want to plant *them*?” Mrs. Muldoon frowned. She seemed to be thinking hard. Suddenly she smiled, as if she had an idea.

Susan licked the last chocolate crumb from her fork. She stood up. “We’d better go home. Mother will wonder what’s taking us so long. Thank you for sharing your cake with us.”

“My pleasure, dearie,” Mrs. Muldoon said. “I hope you’ll come back again. Maybe there are some other things we can share.”

“What took you so long?” Mrs. Allen asked when she opened the door. “I thought you’d rush right back to eat your cake.”

“Mrs. Muldoon wanted us to stay and eat cake with her,” Susan told her mother. “She said it tasted better when you had somebody to eat it with.”

Mrs. Allen nodded. “She must be lonely all by herself in that big house.”

“She asked us to visit her again, Aunt Mary,” Josh said. “She’s a nice old lady.”

“Well, I guess you’ve had enough cake,” Mrs. Allen said. “You’d better go on off to bed. It’s getting late.”

“I’d like a glass of milk,” Susan said. “Mrs. Muldoon didn’t have any.”

“There’s plenty in the refrigerator,” her mother told her. “Just be sure you turn off the light in the kitchen when you’re finished. Daddy and I want to watch a movie on television.” She went into the living room.

Josh and Susan walked into the kitchen. Susan put two glasses on the table and took a container of milk from the refrigerator. “Josh,” she said, “what do you suppose Mrs. Muldoon was drinking? It smelled funny.”

Josh poured milk into the glasses. “Stop it, Sue. You’re getting ready to make up a whole story about Mrs. Muldoon. Next thing you’ll start in with the witch stuff again.”

“Didn’t you see she never really ate any cake, Josh?” Susan said. “You know witches only eat toads.”

Josh laughed. “Don’t be silly, Sue.”

“Have you forgotten the magic mint leaves?” Susan asked.

“Mrs. Muldoon didn’t plant that garden.” Josh felt in his pocket. “Hey, Sue, you used all the leaves to put the newspaper back together.”

Susan ran to the kitchen waste basket. “Mother must have thrown out the trash. The paper bag is gone.”

Susan lay awake for a long time after the lights were out. She kept thinking about Mrs. Muldoon and the magic mint leaves. Whatever Josh thought, Susan was sure Mrs. Muldoon was a witch.

Suddenly Susan remembered something. She sat up in bed.

The house was quiet. Susan didn't waste time looking for her bedroom slippers. She tiptoed down the dark hall in her bare feet to Josh's room.

A faint light glowed in his bed. Susan pulled back the sheet.

Josh jumped up. "Oh, it's you." He was reading a book with a flashlight under the sheet. "I found this in the bookcase downstairs. It's so exciting I couldn't stop reading."

"Sh-sh," Susan whispered. "Josh, we left my mother's clothesline hanging down into Mrs. Muldoon's yard."

Josh closed the book. He was always ready for action. "Okay, Sue. Let's go get the rope."

The cat was curled up on the foot of Josh's bed. When Josh got up, Patchwork jumped to the floor. She followed Josh and Susan down the stairs and slipped out of the back door after them.

The moon was just rising over the row of houses behind the yards. Susan was first up the tree. She was sorry she hadn't put her sneakers on. But she didn't want to go back for them now. She wished she was wearing pajamas like Josh. A nightgown wasn't the best thing to climb trees in.

Susan sat down on the branch that had the rope tied to it. She slid along sideways over the fence and into the yard next door. Just as

she was about to untie the rope, Susan looked down into Mrs. Muldoon's garden. It looked quite different at night.

Josh crawled along the branch behind her. "The yard's not as messy as it was."

"The witch has been working in it." Susan pointed to the tall plants against the back fence. "See, Josh. She's done something to the sunflowers."

In the moonlight the big flowers did not look yellow at all. Instead they seemed to shine with a strange white light. Susan thought they were the same color as her mother's pearl earrings.

"It's just the moonlight, Sue," Josh said. "Come on. I'll show you."

Susan climbed down the rope into the garden. Josh was right behind her.

They walked along the cement path until they came to the back fence. Susan looked up at the big flowers. They were higher than her head.

Josh reached up and broke off two petals. He handed one to Susan.

The petal seemed to move in her hand. Susan stared at it. “Josh,” she whispered. “It’s growing!”

Josh looked at the petal he was holding. It grew bigger and bigger. Then it stopped and floated in the air. He held onto it with both hands. “Sue,” he said in a low voice, “I feel funny.”

Susan felt strange too. It was just as if she didn’t weigh anything. Her petal was now almost as long as her arm.

A little breeze stirred the leaves of the apple tree. Suddenly it blew Susan off her feet. She was so surprised that she let go of the petal. At once she fell to the ground.

She stood up. Now Susan felt just as heavy as she always did. The shining petal was still floating right over her head.

She saw that Josh was holding tight to his petal. He seemed to have trouble keeping his feet on the ground. The next thing Susan knew Josh was climbing onto the petal. Then he stood up on it.

The breeze sent both the flower petal and the boy sailing across the moonlit garden. Josh bent his knees and leaned forward. He flew back to where Susan was standing. “Look, Sue, a flying skateboard!” Josh went floating across the yard again.

It looked like such fun that Susan wanted to fly too. The petal still hung in the air above her. Susan took a deep breath. She stood on tiptoe to grab hold of one end of the petal. As soon as she touched it she felt lighter than a feather. Her feet drifted off the ground.

The petal started to rise. Susan held onto it with both hands. She pulled herself up and sat down.

Under her the petal felt silky smooth and bouncy. Susan didn't want to stand up on it as Josh was doing. Instead she held onto each side and swung her feet back and forth. It was like being on a swing. If she leaned back the petal rose higher. When she bent forward it flew down.

Susan began to enjoy herself. She flew high over the apple tree and down into her own yard. Patchwork was sitting on the flagstones.

"Meow!" The cat stood on her hind legs and batted at the flying petal with her front paws.

Susan bent over and picked her up. She put the cat on her lap and flew back over the fence into Mrs. Muldoon's yard.

The breeze blew through Patchwork's whiskers. She arched her back and sniffed the air. The cat seemed to like flying just as much as Susan did.

Josh was trying to do tricks. He leaned far over to one side to make a sharp turn. "Oops!" One of his feet had slipped off the petal. Josh stood on the other. He flew over to Susan. "Isn't this great?"

"Watch out!" Susan said.

The petal tipped to one side. Josh slid off. He grabbed the petal as he fell and held on with both hands.

The cat saw what was happening to Josh. She became so excited that she dug her sharp claws through Susan's thin nightgown.

"Ouch!" Susan flew down to the ground. She put the cat on the cement walk. "Sorry, Patchwork. I'll take you for a ride when I'm wearing jeans."

The cat jumped onto the side fence and sat there watching Josh. His sunflower petal was flying round and round the garden now. Josh was still holding tight to it. But he was being pulled through the air behind the petal.

Susan flew to Josh. She reached out and took hold of his petal. It stopped still and floated in mid-air.

Josh climbed back on it. “Thanks, Sue.” He sat on the petal as if he were riding a horse. “Giddyap!”

The petal flew forward.

All of a sudden Susan saw something. She flew after Josh and grabbed him by the arm.

“What’s the matter, Sue?” he said.

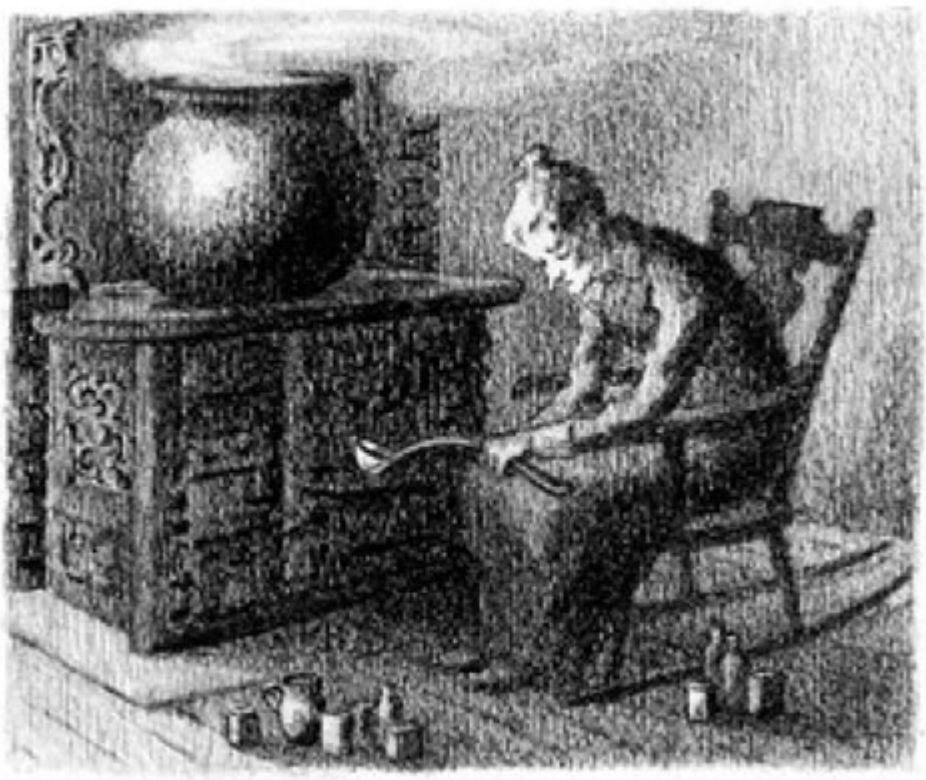
“Sh-sh!” Susan pointed to Mrs. Muldoon’s house.

A faint light shone through a crack in one of the venetian blinds.

“That must be Mrs. Muldoon’s kitchen,” Josh whispered. “Let’s go see what’s going on in there.”

Susan and Josh flew over to the window and peeked through the crack in the blind.

11



A candle was burning on the kitchen table. By its light Susan and Josh could see a big old-fashioned stove. There was an iron pot on the stove. It was so large that it covered all the burners.

Josh stared at the big pot. “You’re right, Sue! She *is* a witch!”

Mrs. Muldoon was fast asleep in a rocking chair beside the stove. A lot of little cans were on the floor at her feet. The cans looked like those in Mrs. Allen’s spice cabinet. But these were old and rusty. There were three dusty bottles and a chipped jug on the floor too.

Mrs. Muldoon was holding a soup dipper in her hand. She smiled in her sleep.

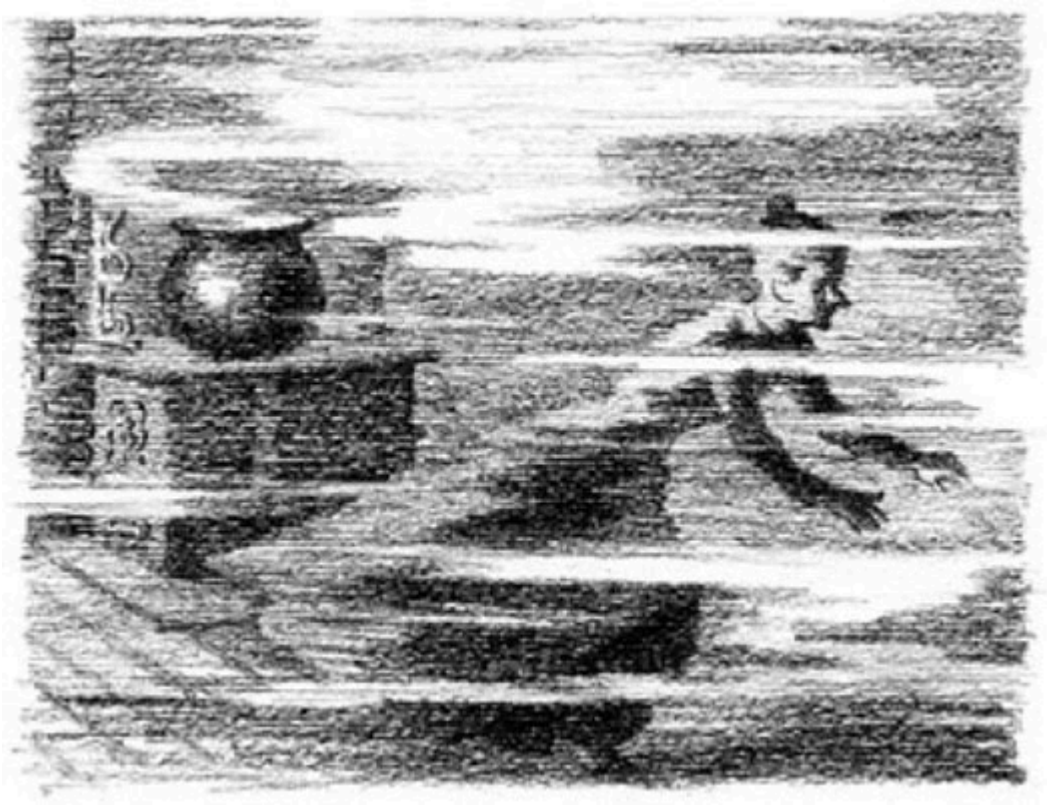
All at once the big pot gave a hiss. It started to boil over. Susan and Josh saw the witch open her eyes. She jumped to her feet and turned off all the burners on the stove. “Now, let me see,” she said. “What did I put in here?”

She dipped out a little of the brew in the pot and sniffed it. “Very interesting,” she said. “But it needs something.” Mrs. Muldoon walked over to a cupboard on the wall and took out a small stone jar. She walked back to the stove and poured something dark and green out of the jar into the big pot.

Bang!

Josh and Susan thought the big black pot was going to explode. The kitchen began to fill with yellow smoke. Mrs. Muldoon ran to her back door.

“Come on, Sue!” Josh backed his petal away from the window. He flew over the fence into Susan’s yard.



Now Susan heard Mrs. Muldoon's back door creak. The witch was coming out into the yard.

Susan swung her legs wildly. She flew after Josh. She caught up to him on the other side of the fence.

"We left my bedroom window open," Susan gasped.

Susan and Josh flew up to the window. They rushed through it so fast that they banged into each other and fell to the floor.

Susan got to her feet. She reached up to grab her petal. But it floated up in the air. Josh's petal was rising too. Both petals hit the ceiling at the same moment.

Pop! They broke like a pair of balloons and came drifting down.

Susan picked them up off the floor. They were damp and curled and no bigger than any other sunflower petals.

12

“Wake up. It’s getting late.” Mrs. Allen pulled down the sheet. “Susie! Didn’t you take a bath last night?”

Susan looked down at her feet and legs. They were scratched and dirty from climbing the apple tree.

Her mother walked over to the window. “There’s Mrs. Muldoon working in her garden. What a job that must be! The yard hasn’t been weeded for years.”

Susan looked out of the window. The witch was trying to dig up a large bush with an old spade.

“Go take a shower, Susie,” her mother said. “Your dad has already left for work. I’d better wake Josh. You children are wasting the best part of the day.” She went down the hall to Josh’s room.

When Susan and Josh came down to the kitchen, there was a batch of pancakes all ready for them. They sat down to eat.

Mrs. Allen poured two glasses of orange juice. “I offered to lend Mrs. Muldoon our garden fork. I’d like you to take it over to her.”

Susan and Josh finished their breakfast. They went down into the basement to look for the garden fork. It was in the furnace room along with the spade and the rake.

Josh picked up the fork. “I’d like to get back into that garden,” he said.

“Even though we know Mrs. Muldoon is a witch?” Susan asked.

Josh grinned.

Susan was quiet for a minute. She really wanted to go back into the garden too. There must be all sorts of magic in a place like that.

“How about it, Sue?” Josh said.

Susan picked up a trowel. “I’m ready.”

They went out by the basement door under the front stoop. Susan climbed the steps of the house next door and rang the doorbell. She had to ring several times before the door opened.

Mrs. Muldoon stood in the doorway. Her hands were covered with dirt. She looked hot and tired. Her white hair curled in damp little rings around her wrinkled face. And her long pointed nose was sunburned. But when she saw the two children she smiled.

Josh handed her the garden fork. “Would you like some help in your garden?”

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Muldoon said. “I have some seedlings that are all ready to be planted. Come in.”

Josh and Susan stepped into the house. Even in the daytime it was dark and shadowy inside. Mrs. Muldoon walked down the hall into the dining room.

Josh pointed to the chocolate cake on the table. “She hasn’t eaten any more of it,” he whispered to Susan.

Mrs. Muldoon went through the swinging door into the kitchen. Josh and Susan followed her.

The big pot was still on the stove. But now there was no steam coming out of it.

Mrs. Muldoon put down the garden fork. She pulled a green plastic watering can from under the table. The witch took the watering can to the stove and used her big dipper to fill it from the pot. When it was full, the witch carried the watering can out into the garden. She set it down on the stone step outside the back door.

Mrs. Muldoon came back into the kitchen. She pointed to a flat box of dirt on the table. There were little green plants in the box. “These are my seedlings.”

“What are they?” Susan asked.

Mrs. Muldoon rubbed her chin. “I’m not sure yet what they’re going to be,” she said. “Plants change, you know. I’m going to water these with a new mixture.”

She handed the box of plants to Josh. Susan picked up the fork, and they all went out into the garden.

13

Josh set the box of little plants down on the cracked cement walk. “Hand me the fork, Sue.” He turned to Mrs. Muldoon. “Where do you want me to dig?”

The witch leaned over the box. She poked one of the plants with a bony finger. “If you’re what I think you are,” she said, “you won’t want too much sun.” She looked around the garden.

Susan looked around too. The sunflowers against the back fence looked just like any other sunflowers.

“Josh,” Susan whispered, “we forgot to take the rope off the apple tree.”

“Apple tree?” The witch looked at it. She didn’t seem to notice the rope. “The very place,” she said. “There’s nothing growing under that branch. We could plant the seedlings there.”

Josh set to work with the fork. He dug a round flower bed in the shade of the tree. Susan used her trowel to pick the stones out of the soil. She chopped up the big clods of earth.

Mrs. Muldoon got down on her hands and knees and planted the seedlings. She was very careful with all of them. And she seemed to have something to say to each one. It took her a long time. But at last she was finished. She stood up.

"There now," she said, "I'm ready for a snack. And I'm sure you are too." The witch walked over to her kitchen door. She went into the house and came out again with the chocolate cake. She set it down on the stone step outside the door.

Mrs. Muldoon looked at the cake and rubbed her chin. "Now, what else do I need? Oh, yes, plates. And forks." She rubbed her long chin again. Then she smiled. "And my knife." She turned to go back into the house. "Just wait here, children."

"For a witch she's mighty forgetful," Josh said.

Susan was looking at the new flower bed. Some of the tiny plants were drooping. "Mrs. Muldoon worked so hard to plant them," Susan said. "But she's forgotten to water them."

Josh went to get the watering can. He came running back with it. The big garden fork was lying across the cement walk. Josh tripped over it and the watering can flew out of his hand. Both Josh and Susan were splashed.

"Take it easy, Josh!" Susan said. "You've got me wet all over."

“I’m soaked,” Josh said. “I didn’t think the watering can had so much in it.”

Susan grabbed hold of Josh’s arm. “Look at your feet!”

Josh looked down. Now he saw that both he and Susan were standing up to their ankles in a deep puddle.

Everything around them was different. They were in the middle of a wide concrete road. On each side of the road was a thick jungle of strange trees.

14

Josh looked around. “Sue, where are we?”

“I don’t know,” Susan said. “But let’s get out of this puddle.”

There were puddles all across the road. Susan and Josh walked around them. The concrete was split into deep ditches. Thin, tall plants were growing in the ditches. A huge log blocked their way. At first Susan and Josh tried to climb over the log. But there were no toe-holds in the wood, and they kept slipping off.

“We’d better go around it,” Susan said.

They walked in the shadow of the log until they came to the end.

“It seems to be some sort of telephone pole that has fallen down. But it’s much bigger than any telephone pole I ever saw.” Josh pointed to four flat metal prongs that curved off the end of the log. “It looks just like the garden fork, Sue.”

Susan stared at the prongs. Then she looked up. For a minute she didn’t say anything. Then she whispered, “Josh, it *is* the garden fork!”

“How did it get so big?” Josh asked.

“It didn’t,” Susan told him. She pointed overhead.

High above them were thick leafy branches. The smallest leaf was as big as a bedspread. A huge rope hung down from a great branch.

Josh saw something else too.

There was no time to lose. He grabbed Susan and pulled her under a tangle of green stems.

A second later a swirl of rusty black feathers dived after them.

Susan and Josh crawled deep into the underbrush. They peered between the leaves.

A giant starling was standing on the concrete road. He cocked his head and tried to see into the jungle where the children were hiding. His yellow beak looked very sharp.

Josh lay on his stomach. It took him a little while to get his breath back. Then he said, “I see what you mean, Sue. The fork didn’t get big. We got small!”

Susan nodded. She had been thinking. “Josh,” she said, “it must have been the stuff in the watering can that did it. Mrs. Muldoon took it from the pot on her stove.”

“The witch’s brew!” Josh said. “Those puddles were just drops from the watering can.” He peeked out at the concrete road. “The drops are almost dried up by the sun already. That concrete road is really the witch’s garden path.” Josh felt the green tree trunk beside him. “This is a weed.”

The starling hopped back and forth. He pecked at a beetle. But the beetle wiggled under a stone. The bird got tired of waiting for Josh and Susan to come out of their hiding place. He flapped his wings and flew away.

The children stayed very still in the weeds. “What are we going to do, Josh?” Susan asked at last.

“I don’t know.” Josh stood up and stretched. He shinnied up a green stem. “Hey, this is fun.” Josh chinned himself on a smooth branch.

Susan saw a shiny yellow flower. She stood on tiptoe to get a better look at it. “Mother pulls these out of our garden. But when weeds are as big as this they’re beautiful.”

Josh was hanging by his knees now. Susan decided to climb one of the bigger plants. She stayed close to the main stem and stepped where the leaves branched off it.

Up and up she went. At the top of the stem she came to a fringed red and white flower. Susan climbed onto it and sat down.

All around her was the smell of cloves. A bee landed on the flower beside her. Susan didn’t move. The bee poked her velvety head into the center of the flower. Susan watched her until she flew away.

Suddenly the flower began to shake. Susan held onto it so as not to fall off. She looked over the edge.

Josh was climbing up. He was in a hurry. “There’s an ant chasing me, Sue.”

15

“An ant?” Susan laughed. “Josh, you’re bigger than an ant.”

“This guy looked mean. You should have seen his jaws.” Josh climbed up onto the flower and sat next to Susan.

Something leaped over their heads. Susan and Josh ducked.

A grasshopper had landed on a leaf near where they were sitting.

“I wish I could jump like that,” Josh said.

Susan watched a blue butterfly. “Wouldn’t it be fun to ride on him?”

Josh shaded his eyes and looked across the garden. “Hey, Sue, look what’s growing over there.” He pointed.

“Raspberries,” Susan said. “And they’re bigger than we are!”

Josh was already climbing down from the flower. He had forgotten all about the ant.

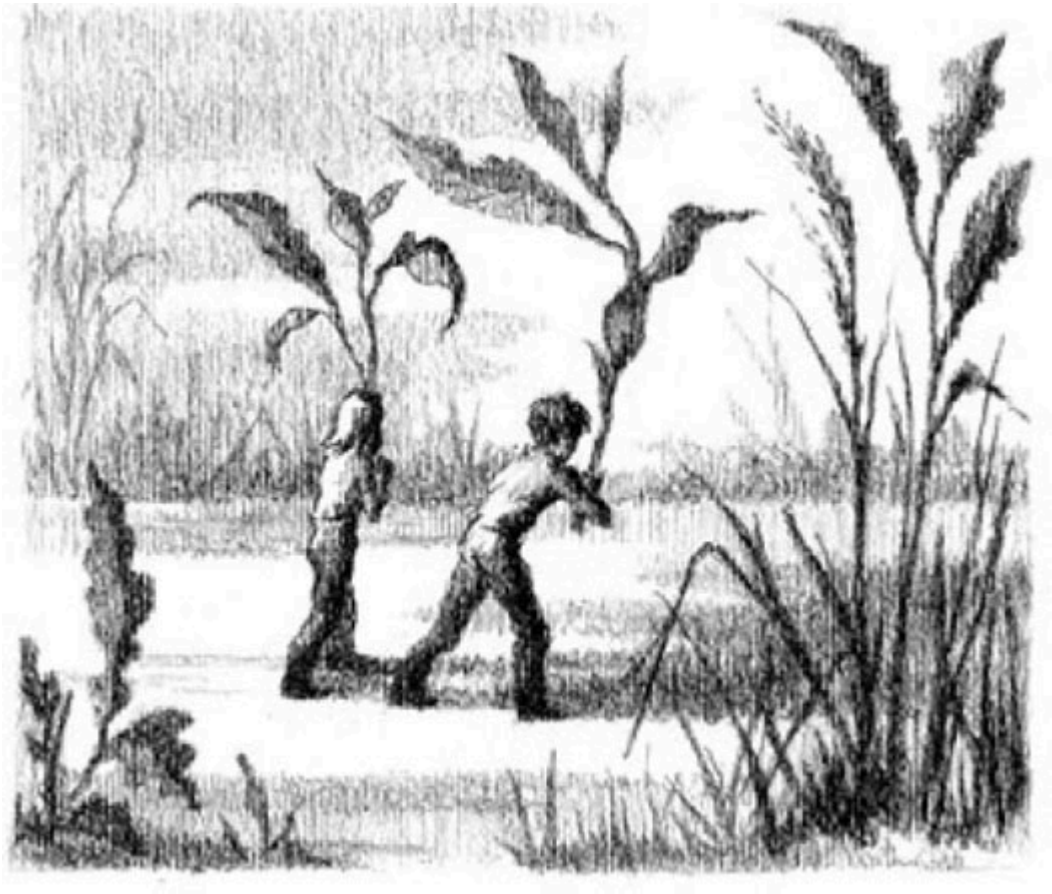
Susan waited until Josh reached the ground before she started down. Some of the leaves of the plant had been kicked off. It was harder to go down than it had been to climb up.

Josh looked out at the wide concrete road. “I’d rather walk on that than through this jungle.”

“The birds will go for us if we come out from under the weeds,” Susan reminded him.

“We don’t have to come out from under the weeds.” Josh pulled a penknife from his pocket. He cut through the stem of a leafy weed. Then he handed the weed to Susan. “Use this like an umbrella.” Josh began to cut another stem.

Josh and Susan held the weeds over their heads. They stepped out onto the road. Susan wondered what the birds would think about walking weeds. She was ready to dive back into the jungle at any minute. But the huge birds went on twittering in the branches of the apple tree high overhead. They didn't seem to notice the children.



Josh and Susan marched along what seemed to be a road. It was really the cement path. And it led them to the witch's back door.

Josh took a look at the chocolate cake. "Wow!" He climbed onto the stone step.

Susan looked at him. "Wait a minute, Josh. Don't you think you ought to take your sneakers off before you step on the plate?"

Josh leaned over to help Susan climb up. Then they both pulled off their sneakers and walked barefoot onto the cake plate.

They had to be careful not to step in the patches of gooey icing. The cake looked like a wall of chocolate crumbs. Josh and Susan sat

next to it. They held their weed umbrellas over their heads with one hand. With the other hand they dug into the wall.

Neither of them had ever eaten so much cake. But no matter how much they ate it didn't make a dent in the wall.

At last Josh wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I've had enough cake to last me the rest of my life."

"So have I," Susan said. "And I'm thirsty. I wonder what we can drink."

"How about raspberry juice?" Josh suggested.

Susan stood up. "That bush is halfway across the garden. We can walk off some of the cake. Put your sneakers on, Josh."

Now that they had the weed umbrellas Josh and Susan felt much safer. They walked along the path in the warm sun. Susan watched the shadow of her leafy umbrella on the concrete. The raspberry bush stuck up out of the weeds.

Suddenly something leaped off the high board fence between the yards. “Look out, Josh!” Susan dived into the weeds at the side of the path.

Josh wasn’t quick enough. A monster cat pounced on him.

“Patchwork!” Susan screamed.

The cat didn’t seem to hear.

Josh lay on the ground between the cat’s front paws. One of her sharp claws dug into the sleeve of his polo shirt. He couldn’t get away.

“Don’t move, Josh.” Susan tried to sound calm. But her heart was thumping like a hammer.

She grabbed the nearest weed and began to shinny up. It was only a thin stem of grass. And it bent under her weight.

Susan climbed all the way to the top of the stem where the grass turned to tassels of seeds. The seeds kept falling off. It was hard to get a grip.

The cat put her face down near Josh. She opened her mouth. Susan saw the sharp white teeth coming closer and closer to Josh. She let go of the tassels and made a flying leap.

Susan landed right between the cat's ears. Patchwork raised her head and shook it. Susan almost fell to the ground. But she grabbed hold of the cat's fur and hung on tight.

Still holding on, she crawled over to one of Patchwork's ears. It was like a tent with a curtain of long hairs over the doorway.

Susan stood up and pushed her way through the curtain. She put her hands to her mouth and yelled as loud as she could down into the cat's ear. "Patchwork! Don't you know Josh?"

The cat seemed to think she had a flea in her ear. She shook her head so hard that Susan fell down. She rolled out of the cat's ear and grabbed one of the whiskers over Patchwork's left eye.

The cat was staring at Josh. Again she put her face down next to him. Her pink nose twitched.

Susan couldn't bear to look. She shut her eyes. Then she heard a sound like a motor boat. What was it? Suddenly Susan knew.

Patchwork was purring!

Josh screamed. “Take it easy, cat!”

Susan opened her eyes. Patchwork was licking Josh’s face with her huge tongue.

“Help!” Josh yelled. “Susan, *do* something!”

Susan let go of the whisker. She started to slide down the cat’s nose. Halfway down she used her feet as brakes. Susan stopped sliding and stood up. She waved her arms.

Patchwork stared at her with crossed eyes. The cat reached up a paw to brush Susan off her nose.

Susan jumped. She landed in a patch of weeds and hid under a clump of grass.

While the cat was looking at Susan, Josh wiggled out of his polo shirt. He rolled away from Patchwork’s paw. Then he got to his feet and dived after Susan.

The cat sniffed the little shirt that was still caught on one of her claws. She shook her paw until the shirt fell off. Patchwork stood up and stretched. She yawned and walked away down the path.

Susan heard her mother calling. “Patchwork! Chow time!”

The cat jumped onto the fence and down on the other side.

17

For a few minutes neither Josh nor Susan said anything. Susan waited until her heart stopped thumping. “Are you all right, Josh?” she asked.

“I seem to be,” he said. “But that cat’s tongue is just like sandpaper. My face is sore all over.”

“I’m still thirsty,” Susan said. “And I don’t feel like going out into the open—even with a weed umbrella.”

“I don’t either,” Josh said. “But I’d better get my shirt.” He peered out from between two stems of grass. A fuzzy caterpillar was crawling across the cement walk toward the shirt. Josh jumped out of the weeds. He grabbed his shirt and ran back to where Susan was waiting. “That’s the kind of caterpillar that gives me hives.”

Susan laughed. She looked at Josh. “Three hives would cover all of you.”

“It’s not funny, Sue.” Josh put on his shirt.

“If we walk through the weeds we ought to come to the raspberry bush.” Susan began to push her way between the green stems.

It was rough going. Sometimes Josh had to use his pen knife to cut a path between the plants. At last they saw the raspberry bush sticking up out of the jungle ahead. The berries looked like bunches of round juicy red balloons. Susan could almost taste them. Her mouth began to water.

“Last one to the raspberry bush is a rotten potato!” Josh began to race. He ran around big weeds and jumped over small ones.

Susan tore after him. She had almost caught up when Josh tripped over a root. Susan was running too fast to stop. She fell right on top of him.

Both of them tried to get up to start the race again. They rolled over each other and into a patch of soft green leaves.

“What’s that smell?” Susan sat up and looked around. The jungle was gone! She was sitting in the sunlight in the witch’s garden. Josh was next to her.

“Chewing gum.” Josh picked a leaf from the plant they were sitting on. He held it under her nose.

Susan stood up. The raspberry bush was only a step away. She picked two little ripe berries and handed one of them to Josh.

“I can’t help wishing,” Susan said, “that we’d rolled into the magic mint leaves *after* we’d eaten the raspberries.”

The back door banged. Mrs. Muldoon had come out into her garden. She looked at Susan and Josh. “I see you like raspberries,” she said. “I never cared for them myself. I was wondering if I should dig up that bush.”

The witch held a tray with plates and forks and glasses on it. There was a pitcher on the tray too.

Susan and Josh ran over to help. Mrs. Muldoon gave Josh the pitcher. He was careful not to spill what was in it.

“Would you like to cut the cake, Susan?” Mrs. Muldoon handed her the dagger knife. “Don’t bother to give me a piece.” The witch set the tray on the stone step. “You can pour the milk, Josh.”

“Milk?” Josh almost dropped the pitcher.

“Oh, dear, don’t you like milk? That’s too bad! I made a special trip to the store to buy it for you. That’s what took me so long. I never keep milk in the house. But I was sure you’d want some with your cake.” The witch thought for a minute. Suddenly she smiled. “Maybe you’d like something else to drink?”

“We *love* milk!” Susan started to cut the cake. She made the pieces as small as she could.

Josh poured two glasses of milk. He and Susan sat down on the stone step to drink it.

Mrs. Muldoon saw the watering can lying on the path. She picked it up and looked inside. “Empty. That’s funny. I was sure I’d filled it.” She carried the watering can to the back door.

Josh and Susan stood up to let her go into the house. As soon as the back door closed behind the witch, Josh scraped the cake off his plate into a patch of weeds. “I can’t eat any more cake today,” he said.

“Neither can I.” Susan dumped her cake into the dirt. She dug it in with the trowel.

They both finished drinking their milk.

Mrs. Muldoon came out of the house with the watering can. She looked at the empty plates. “How about a second helping?”

“No, thank you,” Susan said.

Josh put his glass on the tray. “We’ve had plenty, Mrs. Muldoon.”

The witch walked slowly along the garden path looking at the plants. “I’m not at all sure I should water them with this mixture. It’s something new. I don’t know what it will do.” She turned to Susan and Josh. “I try to be careful. But sometimes things go wrong. My aunt Martha was always making mistakes. She had a lot of trouble with this garden. She moved away a long time ago. I never found out why.” Mrs. Muldoon put down the watering can and picked up the garden fork.

“I’ll help you with that,” Josh said.

The witch handed him the fork. “Do you see that bush over in the corner?”

“You mean the one with the long trailing branches?” Josh asked.

“Yes. It looks sad. I think it might be happier in a sunny spot,” Mrs. Muldoon said.

“That’s the bush you were trying to dig up this morning,” Susan said. “Mother and I saw you from my window.”

“I couldn’t get anywhere with my old spade,” the witch told her. “Maybe you and Josh can do better.”

19

Josh and Susan took turns with the fork. It was like trying to dig into a rock. The ground around the weeping bush was packed hard.

Mrs. Muldoon stroked one of the long trailing branches. “Got you trapped in there, dearie, have they?” she said to the bush. “We’ll get you out.”

Susan thought the bush perked up a little. A breeze caught the branches and set them dancing.

“Sue,” Josh said, “there are a lot of stones around this bush. If we pull them out it will be easier to dig.”

Susan ran to get the trowel. She set to work to help Josh dig out the stones. They were several inches under the ground. Josh pushed the fork down and wiggled it next to a stone. Susan used the trowel to scrape the dirt away. Together they dug up the first stone.

After that it was a little easier. One by one they took the stones out of the dirt. They made a pile of them beside the bush.

Mrs. Muldoon walked around her garden. She stopped to talk to some of the plants.

"The stones are in circles, Josh," Susan said. "Somebody put them here on purpose—"

"So nobody could dig up the bush!" Josh looked at the ground. "Maybe there's a treasure buried here."

Susan shoved the trowel down as hard as she could. Josh stamped on the fork to push it into the dirt.

Mrs. Muldoon was singing. "The flowers that bloom in the Spring, tra-la—"

The pile of stones grew bigger and bigger. At last Josh was able to dig the fork down deep. Mrs. Muldoon came over. "Be careful of the tap root," she said. "That's the big one in the middle."

The bush was wobbly now. Josh pushed the fork right under it. The witch took hold of the main stem and gently lifted the bush out of the ground. She laid it on the garden path. "It won't be long now, dearie," she said to the bush.

"Where are you going to plant it?" Susan asked.

"Oh dear. I forgot. We should have made a new hole to put the bush in before we dug it up." Mrs. Muldoon began to trot around the garden, looking for just the right sunny place.

Josh grabbed Susan's arm. He pointed to the hole in the ground where the bush had been.

Susan saw that dirt was falling from the sides of the hole into the middle. But it didn't fill up the hole. Instead the hole was getting bigger. And it was deep. They couldn't see the bottom.

Now Josh and Susan saw that there were steps in the hole.

"How about planting the bush over here?" the witch called from the other side of the garden. "There's plenty of sun." She looked at Josh and Susan. They were still staring into the hole in the ground.

Mrs. Muldoon walked over and peered down into the hole too. She stroked her long chin and said nothing.

“Josh thinks there’s a treasure down there,” Susan told the witch. “If we find it you could pay your electric bill.”

“We’ll need a candle to explore the underground cave. There’s one on your kitchen table.” Josh ran to the back door.

Mrs. Muldoon leaned over the hole and sniffed with her long nose. Then she stood up straight and looked at Susan. “I haven’t had a really exciting adventure in years. This ought to be fun.”

Josh came running back with the candle and some kitchen matches.

The witch took them from him. She struck a match and lit the candle. Then she put her bony hand over the little flame. “I don’t want the breeze to blow it out,” Mrs. Muldoon said.

She lifted the skirt of her rusty brown dress above the tops of her shoes and stepped down into the hole. Josh came after her. Susan was last.

The steps were made of rough stones, like the stones they had dug out of the garden. Susan and Josh had a hard time to keep from tripping. But the witch walked down with no trouble. She held the candle high to light the way.

The sides of the hole were made of stones too. Here and there a little stream of water ran down over them. As they went deeper into the earth the air began to feel damp and cold.

Mrs. Muldoon walked more quickly than Josh and Susan had thought she could. She almost danced down the stairs ahead of them. Every so often she lifted her long pointed nose and sniffed the air. Twice she stopped to put her hand to her ear. She seemed to be listening for something.

At the bottom of the steps they walked into a tunnel. The walls of this too were made of stones. Now the air became warmer. Soon it was much too warm. Even the stones under their feet began to feel hot.

The tunnel led to an iron door. Mrs. Muldoon touched the door handle with her bony finger. “Hot!”

She handed the candle to Josh. “Hold this a minute, dearie.” She wrapped several folds of her baggy brown skirt around the door handle and tried to turn it. “Locked,” the witch said.

Susan saw something lying between two stones on the ground at her feet. She picked it up.

It was a rusty iron key.

Susan tried the key in the door. The key fitted. But Susan couldn’t get it to turn. She wiggled it. Still it didn’t turn. Then, just as Susan was about to give up, the lock clicked. Mrs. Muldoon pulled the door open.

A blast of hot air hit them. All three jumped back.

Josh stared into the room on the other side of the door. “It’s like an oven in there.”

At first there seemed to be no light in the room. Then they could see a red glow in the darkness. It began to get brighter. And it came nearer.

Suddenly it was blazing. They saw a huge slimy creature. It had bulging eyes, sharp claws, and a long tail.

Mrs. Muldoon backed away from the open door. “Run, dearies,” she said. “It’s a dragon!”

21

Josh dropped the candle.

Susan raced back through the dark tunnel. She could hear Josh pounding along behind her. Mrs. Muldoon came after Josh. The heels of her shoes tapped on the stone floor.

The dragon made no noise. But Susan knew he was not far away. She could feel the hot blast of his breath as he slid through the tunnel in back of them.

It seemed forever before she reached the bottom of the steps. Susan turned around to see if Josh and Mrs. Muldoon were still coming. She couldn't be sure of anything except that the dragon was getting closer. He was like a fire in the darkness.

Someone crashed into Susan. She fell to the ground.

"Are you all right, Sue?" Josh pulled her to her feet.

"Yes." Susan started up the steps.

A faint light came from overhead. Susan climbed as fast as she could. She was out of breath. And her heart was thumping so hard it hurt. But she kept going.

Twice Susan fell on the slippery steps. She scraped her knee on the rough stones. Up and up she went. At last she climbed out of the hole and into the open air.

A few seconds later Josh came up into the sunshine too.

Susan blinked in the bright light. She turned around to look at the hole in the ground. "We'd better get ready to close this up as soon as Mrs. Muldoon comes out."

"The hole is too big now for that bush we dug out of it." Josh looked around for something to block up the hole.

"What's taking Mrs. Muldoon so long? I thought she was right behind us." Susan leaned over and looked down the steps. "It's dark in there. I don't see the glow from the dragon."

Susan felt a chill run down her back. She looked at Josh. His face was white.

"Sue," he said, "we have to *do* something. The dragon must have caught Mrs. Muldoon!"

22

“We’ll need a light to get down those steps,” Josh said. “I’ll see if I can find another candle.” He ran over to the house and went into the kitchen.

Susan looked around the garden. The watering can was on the cement path where Mrs. Muldoon had left it.

Susan walked over to the can and looked in. It was half-full of something.

Josh opened the back door. “I found a candle and matches but no candlestick.”

Susan ran to the stone step. She handed Josh one of the plates they had used for the cake. He lit the candle and dripped wax onto the plate. Then he stuck the candle into the wax.

Susan went back and picked up the watering can.

“Careful, Sue!” Josh yelled. “You’d better not fool with that!”

“It’s our only chance,” Susan said. “Come on, Josh.” She walked over to the hole and started down the steps.

Josh came after her with the candle. “Maybe I ought to go first.”

“No,” Susan told him. “If I spilled this stuff on you the candle would shrink.”

“So would I,” Josh said. He thought for a minute. “Sue, don’t you think we ought to go back and get some of the magic mint leaves?”

“We’ve wasted enough time already. I just hope we’re not too late now.” Susan began to walk faster.

The steps were slippery. Susan kept telling herself, “I won’t fall. I won’t fall.”

It seemed a very long time before they came to the bottom. Josh cupped his hand over the flame of the candle. “If the light’s not too bright,” he whispered, “maybe the dragon won’t see it.”

At the foot of the steps Susan felt something soft under her feet. She bent down and picked it up. “Josh, look!”

Josh held the candle close to Susan’s hand. She was holding a burned piece of brown cloth.

“That’s Mrs. Muldoon’s dress,” Josh said.

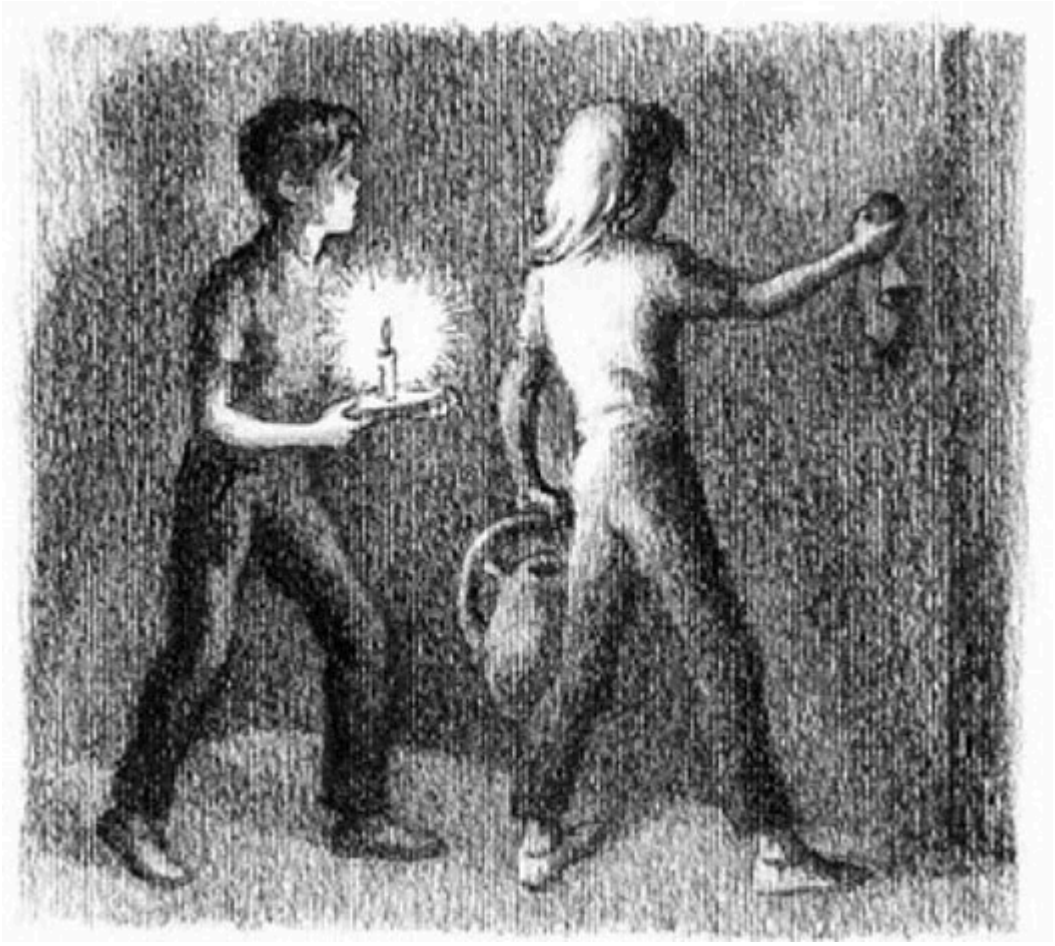
“All that’s left of it.” Susan tried to keep her voice calm. She felt sick. She put the piece of cloth in her pocket and started down the tunnel.

The air got warmer and warmer.

“We must be getting close to the dragon,” Josh said.

They came to the iron door. The key was still in the lock. Susan tried the handle. It was too hot to hold. Susan pulled the piece of cloth out of her pocket and used it like a pot holder. Now she could get a firm grip on the door handle. Susan turned it.

The door swung open.



23

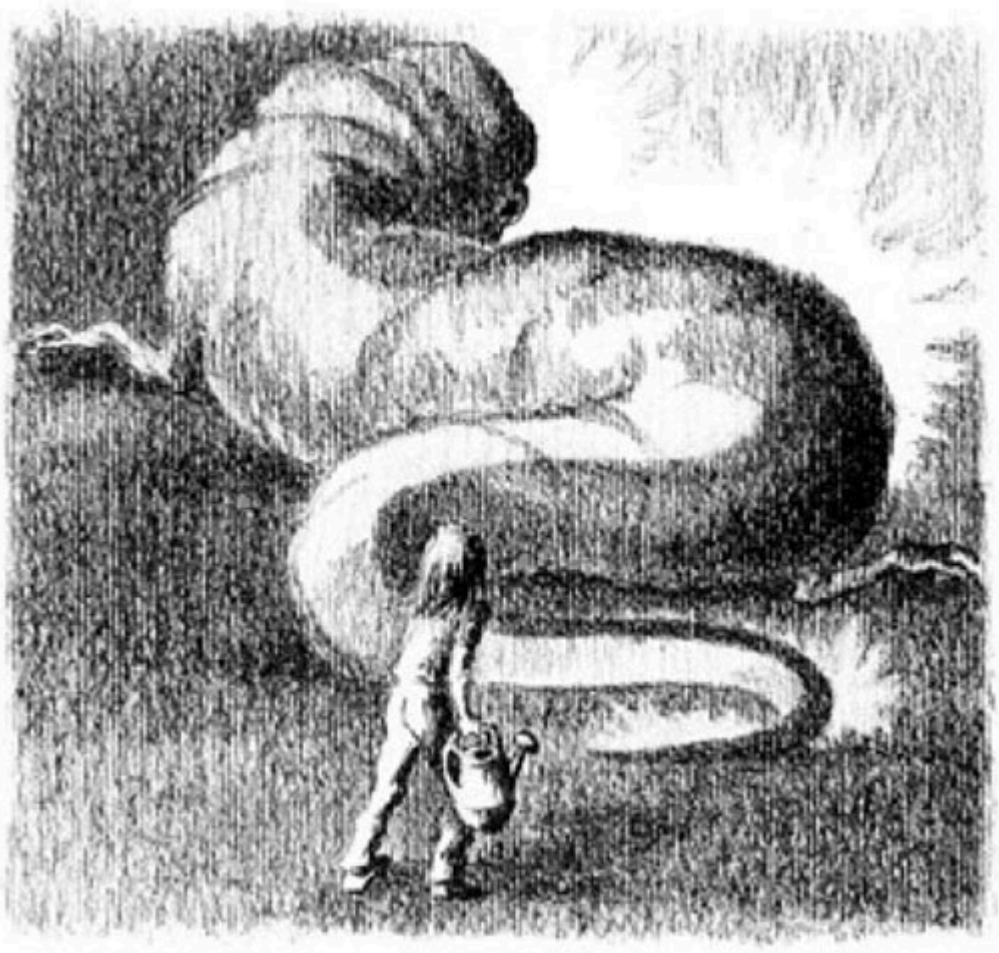
Susan and Josh walked into the room. It was so bright they could hardly keep their eyes open. And it was hotter than any place they had ever known.

The light and the heat were coming from the dragon. He was facing one corner of the room. His back was to the door. And he didn't see Susan and Josh.

Someone was talking. Susan's heart gave a jump. She couldn't believe her ears. Josh put his finger to his lips.

It was Mrs. Muldoon's voice they heard. She must be in the corner the dragon was facing.

The witch was talking very fast. "Look at me," she said. "Can't you see I'm not the one who locked you up down here?"



The dragon moved closer to the corner of the room. Susan raced up behind him.

Suddenly she stopped. An awful thought hit her. Suppose it was only *water* in the watering can? Then the dragon would kill her and Josh as well as the witch.

“You’re a clever dragon,” Mrs. Muldoon said. “Think of all the magic we could do together. Why can’t we be friends?”

The dragon gave a snarl. He bent his terrible head over the witch.

Susan swallowed hard. She held out the watering can and sprinkled the dragon’s blazing tail.

There was a hissing sound. The fire in the tail went out. Then all the fire in the dragon died down. Susan smelled something like wet leaves burning.

Now the room was dark except for the light from the candle.

“Look.” Josh pointed to the dragon.

He was only as big as a baby alligator.

Susan sprinkled him again. The dragon shrank to the size of a lizard.

Susan poured what was left in the watering can on the lizard.

A moment later a little red salamander streaked out of the room.

The witch stepped out of the corner. Her dress was torn and blackened. Her white hair was streaming down. But her wrinkled cheeks looked very pink in the candlelight. And her green eyes were shining.

“There now,” she said, “wasn’t that fun?” Mrs. Muldoon looked at the watering can. “So that’s what that brew does. I wasn’t sure.”

24

Mrs. Muldoon was in a hurry to get back to her garden. “We have to plant that bush,” she said. “It’s been out of the ground too long already.”

Josh dug a hole near the sunflowers. Mrs. Muldoon took the watering can into the house. She brought it out again to fill the hole before she planted the bush.

The witch stroked her chin. She looked up at the sunflowers and smiled. “You’re a friendly bunch,” she said. “I’m sure you’ll cheer up this unhappy bush. You might even teach her a trick or two.” She tipped the watering can.

Josh and Susan jumped back so as not to be splashed.

The witch laughed. “This is only water, dearies. I don’t want to risk having the bush shrink. Not after all it’s been through.” She thought a minute. “But maybe the brew doesn’t shrink bushes. Oh, dear, I wish I could remember what I put in it.”

Just then Patchwork jumped off the fence into the witch’s garden. She raced over to the big hole that had the steps inside it.

“Stay out of there!” Susan ran to grab the cat. She stumbled over the pile of stones. One stone fell into the hole.

Susan rubbed her eyes. “Look!” she said. “The hole is gone!”

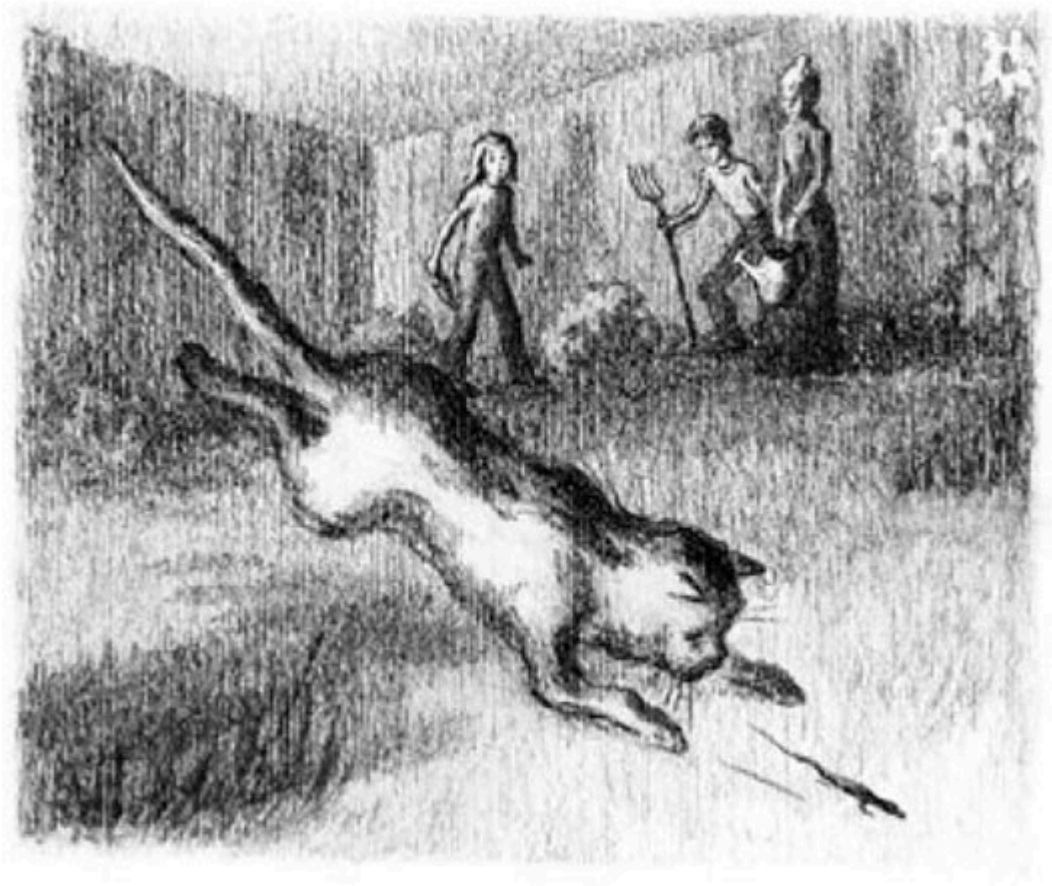
Josh and Mrs. Muldoon had finished planting the bush. They came over to see. The ground was as hard and firm as if there never had been a hole there. The place was covered with a thick patch of weeds.

The witch frowned. “This is just one more of Aunt Martha’s sloppy spells. What a mess she made of this garden!”

Susan heard her mother’s voice.

“Susan! Josh! Lunchtime! Don’t you want a piece of cake?” Mrs. Allen was calling from the other side of the fence.

Mrs. Muldoon tried to cover a yawn. “Run along, dearies,” she said. “I could do with a nap.”



Josh picked up the garden fork. Susan looked around for the trowel. It was over by the pile of stones. She put Patchwork on the ground. The cat poked at one of the stones. A little red salamander ran out into the open. Patchwork chased it across the garden.

Josh looked after them. “I just hope the dragon doesn’t find the magic mint leaves.”

Mrs. Muldoon smiled. “They won’t do *him* any good. They’re another one of Aunt Martha’s sloppy spells. Those leaves won’t work

for anyone over the age of fifteen." The witch clicked her tongue. "They never did *me* any good," she said.

Mrs. Muldoon yawned again. "Come along, dearies." She held the back door open.

Josh and Susan walked into the big kitchen. The fire on the stove was lit. And the big pot was bubbling away.

When they went through the shadowy dining room Susan looked for the bat. He was sitting in the same place on the narrow shelf above the paneling. This time he unfolded his leathery wings and stretched them.

"Go back to sleep, Herbert," the witch said. "These are friends of mine."

Susan and Josh left the house by the front door. At the bottom of the witch's steps, Susan stopped.

"Josh," she said, "my mother's clothesline is still tied to the apple tree."

Josh grinned. "Maybe tonight we'll go and get it."

About the Author

Ruth Chew was born in Minneapolis and studied at the Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington, DC.

Working as a fashion artist, she started writing stories about witches for the youngest of her five children. The first of these, *The Wednesday Witch*, was a big hit, and her new career was born. Ruth Chew went on to write twenty-nine tales of magic and fantasy that have enchanted generations of readers.

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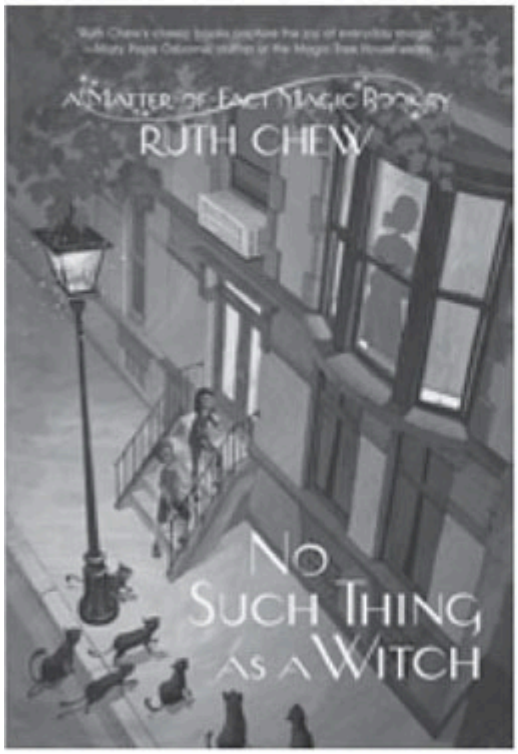

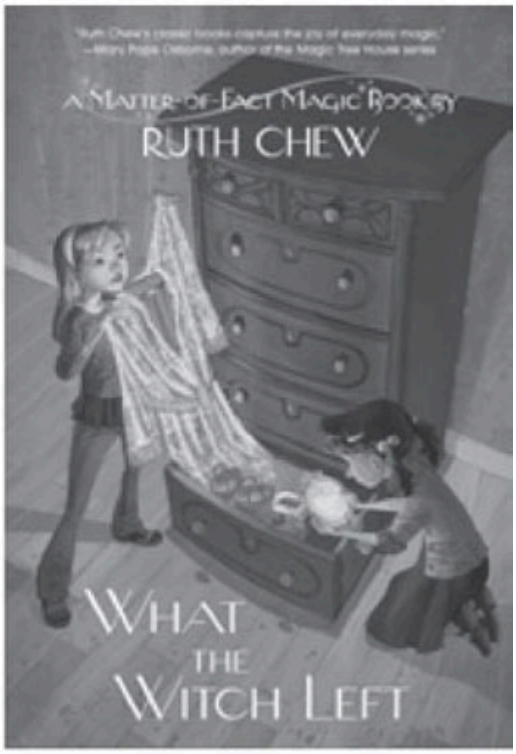

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